

Shiaism's Imamah Doctrine **and the Quran**

By : Abu Saleh

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INTRODUCTION

I became interested in Shia-Sunni discussions a few years ago. I had a number of Shia friends, and I noticed that they were doing some of the Islamic rituals differently. Naturally, I developed a desire to "correct" their ways. However, my knowledge of the differences between the two sides was minimal. As a result, I saw myself pulled into one of the following topics of discussion:

- Who was the rightful Khaliph after the death of the Prophet (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam)
- The righteousness of the Companions after the death of the Prophet (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam)
- Status of the Wives of the Prophet (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam)
- Ashura processions and the practice of Ma'tam
- Mutah marriage
- Battles of Jamal and Sifeen
- The proper way to make Wudhu, Adhan, Salat, and other Islamic rituals

Without a doubt, the above topics are a source of Sunni-Shia discussion. Surely enough, I was drawn into such points of argument, and so were some of my Sunni friends who were also interested in Shia-Sunni dialogue. However, I never paused to consider what the main doctrinal difference between the two sides was. I guess I was simply too immersed in the back and forth that these discussions tend to cause to ponder about the "bigger picture".

This state of affairs continued for some time, until I met a Sunni brother through the Internet. This brother admitted that he had become interested in Shiaism due to the Iranian Revolution in 1979. He read a number of Shia books, and was on the verge of converting to the Shia faith. For the purposes of being fair and equitable to both sides, he started re-reading the Qur'an with an eye to see how much of it supported the uniquely Shia beliefs, particularly the doctrine of Imamah.

The brother told me that he had an awakening at that stage. "I did not find Shiaism in the Qur'an", he said. Then, after re-evaluating the basic principles of the Sunni and Shia faiths in light of the Qur'an, he decided to remain a Sunni. He still reads Shia works and discusses with Shias, but he has not gone out of the general criteria he set for himself with respect to choosing the correct path.

I heard a similar line of reasoning by an Iranian convert from Shiaism to Sunnism. He had researched into the differences between the two faiths for five years before deciding to convert. He pointed out something obvious, yet not widely thought upon by Muslims: The fact that the Qur'an is the top reference for all of the Muslim's disputes. If a certain belief is not strongly mentioned in the Qur'an (or is contradicted by the Holy Book), it is difficult for us to try to find a way for it in other Islamic literature, or to try to formulate it through rationalization and philosophical arguments. He also noted that the Shia, while concentrating a lot on Ali's (Radhia Allahu Anhu) virtues and his supposed right to be the first Khaliph, do not talk much about Imamah outside of this "zone".

These two testimonies were quite revealing for me. While I had read about the belief of Imamah in Shiaism, I had not thought about this specific creed as being the centre of all differences between Sunnis and Shias. I had certainly not thought about comparing Imamah with the established Islamic doctrines, or for the need to look objectively for this dogma in the Qur'an. Perhaps the reason for this is that almost all Shia propaganda concentrates squarely on Ali's (Radhia Allahu Anhu) virtues and his superiority in terms of Khalapha. Imamah is presented as a rational necessity and a consequence of Ali's "appointment", more than as a necessary pillar of Islamic faith.

So I decided to look into the Shia faith from this new perspective, of whether the Qur'an supported the doctrine of Imamah. This work is a summary of the most important conclusions I reached while on this journey. I urge the reader to go through the issues raised thoughtfully and objectively. Even if a person is familiar with the Qur'an, and he/she is familiar with the idea of Imamah as understood in Shiaism, there may be relationships and issues he/she may not have been aware of before.

Why look into Imamah as doctrine?

Every ideology and religion rests on fundamental principles, a set of doctrines that distinguish it from other religions, and through which it can be identified. For example, Christianity is based, among other things, on the principle of substitutionary sacrifice, the doctrine that humans are too weak to redeem their own sins, and they need the intervention of an innocent and saintly figure who will suffer mightily so that humanity's wrongdoing may be purged. Based on this idea, Christians believe that God sent his "son" (Jesus Christ, or Isa (Alayhi Salaam) in Islamic terminology) to die on the Cross in order to atone for the sins of all humanity.

In the case of Islam, the unique feature is its doctrine of the Absolute Oneness of Allah, and its belief in Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) as the Last Prophet and Messenger of Allah. I say "Last", because there are groups claiming that another Prophet came after Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). Such groups are different religions altogether, even if some of their practices resemble those of Islam.

In Shiaism, the distinguishing factor is the principle of Imamah, the Shia belief that Allah appoints and sends certain individuals, not as Prophets, but as "Imams" for mankind. At times these divinely appointed

individuals may be Prophets as well, but the functions of Prophethood and Imamah are different and are treated as such in Shiaism.

Every other disagreement the Shias have with the Sunnis has its roots in the Shia insistence on Imamah as a principle of Islam, both in belief and practice. From differing views and interpretations of history, entirely different systems of Ahadeeth collection and authentication, and divergent manners of performing Islamic practices, all these dissimilarities can be traced back to Imamah as a doctrine of the Shia faith.

It is therefore only reasonable that the focus of any serious quest for truth would begin and end with the principle of Imamah in the mind of the truth-seeker. Trying to research about the differences between Shias and Sunnis without considering the dogma of Imamah as the main sticking point will lead to dead ends and fruitless arguments. I have personally witnessed a number of discussions that quickly descend into chaos because one side or the other wishes to discuss a subject of peripheral importance.

Given these series of facts, I decided that first I had to evaluate how much magnitude was placed on this distinguishing belief according to the scholars of Shiaism. Likewise, I had to see what the main pillars of the Imamah doctrine were, what precepts Imamah in general was built on. Then I would move on to compare what I had found in the writings of Shia scholars with what the Qur'an said, and see how the correspondence between the two worked out. Given my previous knowledge of Shiaism, my task was more towards bringing all the bits and pieces about Imamah together rather than "starting" a research from scratch. Yet, I believe the mindset and approach noted above will help anyone in their quest, even if the person has limited knowledge on Shiaism and/or the Qur'an.

LOOKING INTO IMAMAH IN SHIAISM

During the time I was discussing with Shias before I began the present research, whenever the word "Imams" was mentioned, it would usually mean the "Divine Leaders" after the Prophet's (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) demise. According to the majority of Shias, the "12 Imams" after the death of Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) are^[1]:

- Ali bin Abu Talib
- Hassan bin Ali
- Hussain bin Ali
- Zainul Aabideen, Ali ibn Hussain
- Muhammad Al-Baaqir
- Jafar As-Saadiq
- Musa Al-Kaadhim
- Ali Al-Ridha
- Muhammad Al-Jawaad
- Ali Al-Haadi
- Hassan Al-Askari
- Al-Mahdi, Muhammad ibn Hassan

The Shia writings often concentrate on "proving" the Imamah of these personalities. However, I resolved to look beyond this level and see what the belief of Imamah was in general as far as Shiaism was concerned. This is so because the general concepts should be put to the test first. Only if the overall notion is correct can the research move on to see who occupies these posts. Of course, there will be "universal principles" of Imamah that can be deduced by looking at the supposed Imamah of these 12 personalities, but the main ideas should be clear with respect to what direction the individual's research is to take.

As an analogy with other faiths, Christian propaganda concentrates on the belief that Jesus Christ died on the cross in order to redeem the sins of humanity. As I had noted previously, this is based on the doctrine of "substitutionary sacrifice", the notion that a heroic figure must suffer in order for humankind to be rescued

from its wretched condition. Now, if this underlying ideology can be shown to be faulty, there will be no need to discuss whether Jesus was the specific “superhero” who came to rescue humanity. There are saintly figures in the beliefs of other nations and religions that fit the description of the Christian Jesus very closely in terms of their absolute sacrifice and heroic selflessness. Thus, it is more apt to look into the essential mindset that gave rise to such beliefs rather than to split hairs over the persons themselves.

In the case of Islam, all Muslims know that Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam), Isa (Alayhi Salaam), Musa (Alayhi Salaam), etc. were Prophets sent by Allah to declare His Message, and no Muslim can reject this. However, the principle and belief in Prophethood is distinct and separate from these personalities. A Muslim is required to believe in Prophethood as a pillar of faith in addition to his faith in the specific persons who were sent by Allah as Prophets and Messengers. The Sunnis require this from their adherents when the belief in the Rasools of Allah is placed as a part of the “Arkan ul Iman” (Pillars of the Faith) in addition to the belief in Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) as the Prophet of Allah. Similarly, Shias list Nubuwwah as a Usul-e-Din, and the belief in Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) as a Messenger of Allah is also a necessity of the Shia faith.

The same is to be expected in the case for Imamah. That is, the specific Imams whom the Shias claim were appointed and sent by Allah are the rational product of the Imamah doctrine. This is a little difficult for some people to understand. The reason for this is that Ali, Hasan, Husayn, (Radhia Allahu Anhum) etc. are immediately presented in Shia propaganda as “Imams” and the discussion on the specifics of the Imamah doctrine (or the fact that it is a doctrine in Shiaism) are discussed much later, once the mind of the reader is ready to accept that the “12 Imams” are holy figures. In many works, the doctrinal nature of Imamah in Shiaism is not even presented as such.

In spite of these obstacles, the researcher should do his/her utmost to separate the two and give due attention to each section. Realizing this crucial difference, I resolved to organize all the information I knew about Imamah and look at the vital aspects driving this belief. What follows is an exposition of the crucial precepts of Imamah as seen by Shia scholars and writers.

Usul-e-Deen and Imamah

In Shiaism, the matters of religion are divided into Usul-e-Deen and Furoo-e-Deen. The Usul-e-Deen are the principles of belief in the religion, analogous to the Pillars of Faith in Sunnism. The Furoo-e-Deen relates to the practices in the religion, such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and so on.

To introduce the reader to what constitutes the Usul-e-Deen in Shiaism, I will quote the following tract from Allamah^[2] Muhammad Husayn Al kashifu'l Ghita's book “The Origin Of Shi'ite Islam and its Principles” (Asl ash-Shi'ah wa usuluha):

Those matters which concern knowledge or wisdom, are called "Usul ad-din" (fundamentals of religion) and they are five: (1) tawhid (monotheism), (2) nubuwwah (Prophethood), (3) the Imamate (Vicegerency), (4) 'adl (Justice) and (5) ma'ad (the Day of Judgement).^[3]

In similar fashion, the Shia scholar Muhammad Ridha Muzaffar states: “We believe that the Imamate is one of the fundamentals of Islam (usul ad-din), and that man's faith can never be complete without belief in it.”^[4]

It should be noted that Sunnis and Shias do share three tenets of belief, namely in the concepts of Tawhid, Nubuwwah, and Ma'ad (stated as the belief in Qiyaamah in Sunni Aqeedah). While the concept of 'Adl is not mentioned as such in Sunni beliefs as a cardinal point of belief, yet it can be compared to the Belief in Qadha and Qadr.

The real issue of contention is with respect to Imamah. As Allamah Al kashifl Ghita mentions: “It is the question of the Imamate which distinguishes the Shi'a sect from all other sects. Other differences are not fundamental; they are "furu'i"”.^[5]

The statement that Imamah is one of the essential tenets and pillars of Islamic faith is of tremendous significance for the researcher. For if the importance of Imamah were to be equated with that of Tawhid, Nubuwwah, or Qiyammah, then any subsequent search and analysis would be carried out with this relationship in mind.

Method of Imam’s appointment

According to Shia ideology, only Allah has the right to decide who the Imam for a given people is. For example, Allamah Musavi Lari writes in “Imamate and Leadership”:

By contrast, the Imamate in the view of the Shi'ah is a form of divine governance, an office depending on appointment just like prophethood, something God bestows on exalted persons.^[6]

he also states:

The Shi'ah are committed to the principle that the right to designate the Imam belongs exclusively to God, and that the people have no role to play in this respect.^[7]

Similarly, Allamah Alkashiful ghita says:

According to the Shi'a point of view, the Imamate, like Prophethood, is divine vicegerency. Just as it is God Almighty Who chose one from amongst His servants for the rank of Prophethood or Messengership ... in the same way it is God Who chooses the Imams. ^[8]

Existence of an Imam more Important for Humankind than Existence of a Prophet

It is also noteworthy to mention that in Imami Shia ideology, the existence of an Imam is of great importance, of such great relevance in fact that the world may remain without a Prophet, but Allah will not leave the world without an Imam. Allamah Muhammad Hussayn Tabatabai writes in his book “Shia”:

... it is not necessary for a prophet (nabi) always to be present among mankind, but the existence of the Imam, who is the guardian of Divine religion, is on the contrary a continuous necessity for human society. Human society can never be without the figure whom Shi'ism calls the Imam whether or not he is recognized and known.

... the functions of prophecy and Imamate may be joined in one person who is then appointed to the functions of both prophet and Imam, or to both the reception of the Divine law and its preservation and explanation. And sometimes they can be separated, such as in periods during which there is no prophet living but when there is a true Imam living among men. It is obvious that the number of God's prophets is limited and the prophets have not been present in every period and age. ^[9]

Similarly, Allamah Muzaffar writes:

... it is impossible for there to be a time without an Imam appointed by Allah, and that it makes no difference if human beings deny him or not, help him or not, obey him or not, or if he is absent from people's sight.^[10]

The Imams superiority in comparison to all Creation, the Shia view

A person doing research into Shiaism will find that many Shia scholars, writers, and propagandists have placed the position of the “12 Imams” above that of all Prophets, with the exception of Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). It can be said that some Shia scholars have taken a different view, as can be seen from the following quote:

Sheikh Mufid^[11] –Rahimahu Allah – said in the book of Maqalat: A group of Imamis affirmatively believe in the preference of the Imams from Ale-Muhammad (A.S) over the rest of the preceding Messengers and Prophets except our Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam), and a group of them obligated their preference over all prophets , save Uli Al-Azm (i.e Noah, Ibrahim, Musa, Essa, Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam)). And a group of them rejected both opinions and affirmatively believed that all prophets are better than the Imams (A.S).^[12]

It can be seen that this is a matter of Ijtihad among the Shia scholars^[13]. Notwithstanding, the first view persists in the minds of many contemporary Shia scholars and writers, and by consequence is reflected in the Shia laity. I believe it is of importance for the reader to go through some of the Shia scholars and writers who have held the view that “The Imams are higher than all Prophets except Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam)”, because it will bring to the forefront just how highly placed the position of Imamah is in the Shia faith.

Testimony from Ayatullah Lankarani’s office

This is an excerpt from a series of questions posed to the Office of the late Grand Ayatullah Mohammad Fazel Lankarani, and available on his official site:

Q2: Is it of the essentials of faith to believe that Imam Ali (a.s.) is superior to all prophets?

A2: No, it is not of the essentials of faith.

Q3: What are the different degrees of prophethood? Imam Ali (as) is not higher in rank than Prophet Muhammad (saws), but he is higher than the other prophets. What is the basis of this claim?

A3: Prophets can be divided into two categories: 1) The Arch-Prophets who were sent on a mission by Allah (swt). They are considered as the prophets of Law and religion. They include Noah (as), Abraham (as), Moses (as), Jesus (as) and Muhammad (saws), whose religions were spread in a wide area at their times. The Last Prophet, Muhammad (saws), is the last of the divine prophets who brought the universal religion, which will remain until the Last Day. There is no prophet after him. 2) The second category includes those prophets who propagated the religions of the Arch-Prophets. The extent of their prophethood and mission was not so great. Imam Ali (as) is higher in rank than other prophets, because of his Imamate, but he is not higher in rank than the Prophet Muhammad (saws), because Muhammad (saws) was both Prophet and Imam and he was the best of all creations.^[14]

As a response to the first question, the Ayatullah answers that it is not one of the essentials of the Shia faith to believe in the superiority of Ali (Radhia Allahu Anhu) over all Prophets. Yet, he expresses his own view when he says that Ali (Radhia Allahu Anhu) is higher than all Prophets except Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). It is of importance that the reason given for Ali’s (Radhia Allahu Anhu) superiority

over all other Prophets is due to his Imamah. In addition, the reason why Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) is higher than Ali (Radhia Allahu Anhu) is that Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) is also an Imam in addition to being a Prophet. This is an important part of the response, since it shows once again the high status Imamah enjoys in Shiaism. (The issue of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) as an “Imam” will be discussed later in this work).

Ayatullah Khomeini’s comments

A very similar view on the superiority of Imamah in comparison to Prophethood was given by Ayatullah Khomeini in one of his speeches, all of which collected in the book “Hukumat- i-Islami” (Islamic Government). In this particular discourse, Khomeini says:

The spiritual status of the Imam is the universal divine viceregency that is sometimes mentioned by the Imams (peace be upon them). It is a viceregency pertaining to the whole of creation, by virtue of which all the atoms in the universe humble themselves before the holder of authority. It is one of the essential beliefs of our Shi’i school that no one can attain the spiritual status of the Imams, not even the cherubim or the prophets. In fact, according to the traditions that have been handed down to us, the Most Noble Messenger and the Imams existed before the creation of the world in the form of lights situated beneath the divine throne; they were superior to other men even in the sperm from which they grew and in their physical composition. Their exalted station is limited only by the divine will, as indicated by the saying of Jibra’il recorded in the traditions on the mi’raj: “Were I to draw closer by as much as the breadth of a finger, surely I would burn.”^[15]

So the same basic Shia opinion is noted here: Imams have a position higher than that of Prophets. Some people who have read Khomeini’s work may object to this, given the translator Hamid Algar’s comment:

The statement here that no one can attain the spiritual status of the Imams, not even the cherubim or the prophets thus carries the strict sense that the Imams are superior to those prophets whose mission lacked the dimension of governmental leadership.^[16]

However, what the translator is in fact saying is that the “12 Imams” of the Ithna Ashariyah sect are lower than those Prophets who were also Imams. The “12 Imams” are still higher than those Prophets who did not have the “dimension of governmental leadership” (i.e. they were not Imams). In essence, whether Ayatullah Khomeini’s statement is taken in itself or the translator’s footnote is included as scholarly evidence, it is still the case that the office of Imamah is higher than the office of Prophethood.

The statement from Allamah Majlisi

The classical encyclopaedic work of Bihar Al-Anwar written by Allamah Baqir Al-Majlisi echoes this same line of thinking. In it, Majlisi dedicated a completed chapter for the belief of the Imams’ superiority entitled: “Their preference (A.S) over the prophets and all the people etc” [Bihar Al-Anwar Vol 26, Chapter 6]. Parts of his arguments in favour of this position are as follows, where Mullah Majlisi quotes the Shia Shaykh Al-Sadooq:

" It should be believed that Allah –tala- did not create a creation better than Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) and after him the Imams (A.S) and that they are the most beloved creation to Allah and honourable to him, and the first to believe in him when Allah –tala- took the covenant from the prophets in the atom (stage). And that Allah –tala- gave to every prophet based on his knowledge of our Prophet (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) and his early confirming of it. And it should be believed that Allah –tala- created all of creations for him and his Ahlul Bayt (A.S), and if it was not for them, he would not have created the Heavens and the Earth, Paradise or

Hell, Adam or Eve, Angels or anything else he created, May Allah's blessings be upon all of them”

After quoting Al-Sadooq, Al-Majlisi said:

" You should know that what he, Rahimahu Allah, mentioned of the preference of our Prophet and Imams (A.S) over all creation and that our Imams are higher than the rest of prophets is a matter that is no doubted by one who examined their traditions (A.S) on they way of submitting and truly believing, and the traditions to this effect are too numerous to count, we have only reported in this chapter a few and it is spread in chapters, especially chapter about the description of the prophets and their types (A.S), chapter that they (A.S) are the word of Allah, and chapter on the appearance of their lights and chapter that they are more knowledgeable than the prophets and chapters about the merits of Ameer-ul-Momineen and Fatimah (A.S), and this is the main opinions of the Imamis (Shia), and is only rejected by one who is ignorant about the traditions. [\[17\]](#)

Shia Encyclopedia's statement

It is also important to consider the views of the Shia sources that try to explain Shiaism to the general public and validate the Shia beliefs with an eye on gaining converts. Prime among these sources is the online "Shia Encyclopedia"[\[18\]](#). The following paragraph is taken from its "Imamat vs. Prophethood (Part I)" article, where it is declared:

The Shia believe that the rank of Imamat (the position of a divinely-appointed leader) is higher than that of prophethood and messengership. Note that here we are comparing the rank of positions and not the rank of persons. As such, two divinely appointed Imams which both have the highest possible position from Allah, may have different ranks. For instance, out of the twelve Imams of Ahlul-Bayt, Imam Ali (Alayhi Salaam) is the most virtuous. Also Prophet Muhammad (PBUH&HF) is more virtuous than Imam Ali (Alayhi Salaam) thought they were both appointed by Allah as leaders.

In other words, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH&HF)... has the highest rank among

mankind, and is the most virtuous creature of God and the most honoured before Allah. The above belief does not undermine his position since Prophet Muhammad was an Imam during his time as well!

the same article also declares:

The Shia further believe that the twelve Imams of the House of Prophet Muhammad have the rank higher than that of ALL the messengers (be Imam or not) except Prophet Muhammad (PBUH&HF). In other words, the Status of the successors of the Seal of the Prophets is higher than that of the successors of all the previous prophets. (Note that the successors of the previous Prophets were themselves prophets).[\[19\]](#)

The statement from Peshawar Nights

Another Shia work distributed with the intention of gaining Sunni converts to the fold of Shiaism is Peshawar Nights, a series of discourses that supposedly took place in 1927 between learned Sunnis and the Shia scholar Sultānu'l-Wa'izīn Shirāzī in Peshawar, Pakistan. In the Seventh Session (Heading "Since the holy prophet was superior to all other prophets Ali was also superior to them") of the book, the Shia scholar Shirāzī elucidates the Shia idea that Ali (Radhiya Allahu Anhu) is held in much higher standing than even the Ul-il-Azm from among the Messengers. Shirāzī says:

On the 20th of Ramadhan, when Ali was on his death bed following the attack by Abdu'r-Rahman Ibn Muljim Muradi, he asked Imam Hasan to call in the Shia who had gathered at the door of his house. When they entered, they surrounded his bed and wept silently. Ali said: You may ask any question you like before I leave you, but your questions should be brief." One of those present was Sa'sa'a Bin Suwhan...

Sa'sa'a said to Ali: "Let me know who is superior, you or Adam." The Holy Imam said: "It is not proper for a man to praise himself, but according to the maxim: 'Declare the blessings that Allah has given you,' I tell you that I am superior to Adam." When asked why this was so, Ali explained that Adam had every means of mercy, comfort, and blessings for him in paradise. He was asked simply to abstain from the forbidden food. But he could not restrain himself, and he ate from the tree. As a result, he was expelled from paradise. Allah did not forbid him, Ali, from eating wheat (which, according to Muslim belief was the forbidden 'tree'). But since he had no inclination towards this temporal world, he voluntarily refrained from eating wheat. (The point of Ali's remark was that excellence of a man before Allah lies in piety and devotion, and that the height of piety lies in abstaining even from what is permissible.)

Sa'sa'a asked: "Who is superior, you or Noah?" Ali replied: "I am superior. Noah called his men to worship Allah, but they did not obey. Their shameful mistreatment was torture to him. He cursed them and invoked Allah: 'O my Lord! Leave not on the earth a single person of the unjust ones.' After the death of the Prophet, even though the people caused me extreme difficulty, I never cursed them. I suffered their torment with patience."

Sa'sa'a asked: "Who is superior, you or Abraham?" Ali replied: "I am superior, for Abraham said: 'My Lord! Show me how Thou Givest life to the dead.' He said: 'What! do you not believe?' He said: 'Yes, but that my heart may be at ease.' (2:260) My faith was such that I said: 'If the veil over the unseen were lifted, my faith would not increase.'"

Sa'sa'a asked: "Who is superior, you or Moses?" The Holy Imam replied: "I am superior, for when Almighty Allah ordered Moses to go to Egypt to invite Pharaoh to the truth, Moses said: 'My Lord! Surely I killed one of them, so I am afraid that they will slay me. And my brother Aaron, he is more eloquent of tongue than I. Therefore send him with me as an aide, to help me. Surely I fear that they will reject me.' (28:33-34) The Holy Prophet ordered me, by the command of Allah, to go to Mecca and to recite the verses of the Chapter 'Al-Bara'a' from the top of the Ka'ba to the Quraish infidels. I was not afraid, even though there were few people there who had not lost a near relative by my sword. Obeying his order, I performed my duty alone. I recited the verses of 'Al-Bara'a' and returned."

Sa'sa'a asked: "Who is superior, you or Jesus?" Ali said: "I am superior, for when Mary became pregnant by the Grace of Allah, and the time of her delivery approached, a revelation was granted to her: 'Leave this holy House for this is a House for prayers, not a place for the delivery of children.' Accordingly, she left the holy House and went to the wilderness where she gave birth to Jesus. But when my mother, Fatima Bint-e-Asad, felt labour pains within the precincts of the holy Ka'ba, she clung to the wall and prayed to Allah in the name of that House and the builder of that House, to lessen her pain. Soon a crack appeared in the wall, and my mother heard a mysterious voice telling her, 'O Fatima! Enter the House of the Ka'ba.' She went in, and I was born inside of the holy Ka'ba." [20]

The same ideology can be deduced from the following statements:

In spite of his (Ibrahim) holding the office of the prophethood he was tested and tried by Allah before He made him an Imam. It means that a prophet is not necessarily an Imam and Imamah is an office of a decidedly higher order...[21]

Imam 'Ali and the other Imams of Ahlul Bayt are believed by the Shi'as to be higher in rank than all prophets and messengers except the Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.).[22]

Denying Imamah and its consequences

It is also important to note the statement given by many Shia scholars with respect to the one who denies Imamah. For example, the Shia scholar, Sheikh al-Sadooq writes:

And our belief concerning him, who denies the Imamah to the Prince of Believers 'Ali b. Abi Talib, on whom be peace, and the Imams after him, is that he is the like of him who denies the apostleship of all the prophets, on whom be peace. And our belief concerning

him, who believes in (the Imamah of) the Prince of Believers and denies a single one of the Imams after him, is that he is in the same position as one who accepts all the prophets but denies the apostleship of our Prophet Muhammad. And Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq said: He who denies the least among us is like him who denies (the claims of) the first among us.

And the Prophet said: The Imams after me are twelve, the first of them is the Prince of Believers 'Ali b. Abi Talib, and the last of them is the Mahdi (rightly guided), the Qa'im (the upholder of the true religion); obedience to them is obedience to me and disobedience to them is disobedience to me; and he who denies one of them has verily denied me. And Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq said: He who doubts in the infidelity (kufr) of our enemies who have wronged us is himself an infidel (kafir).[23]

Sheikh Mufid (a student of Al-Sadooq) comments:

There is consensus amongst the Imamiyyah that whoever denies the Imamah of anyone of the Imams, and denies the duty of obedience to them that Allah has decreed, that such a person is a kafir, misguided, and that he deserves everlasting torment in Hell.[24]

These and similar declarations are the rational outcome of the Shia insistence on Imamah being a fundamental of belief and that a person's faith is incomplete without it. Even though these declarations may seem to be very strong for the average Sunni, yet they form the nucleus of Shia thinking with respect to Imamah, and should be properly examined by the objective researcher.

What can be concluded about Imamah in Shiaism

Given the above citations, any person can see that the belief of Imamah is the heart of Shiaism. It can be correctly said that without it the Shia faith would cease to exist as a separate group, and the differences between Shias and Sunnis would be merely in matters of Fiqh and Islamic legislation.

The Shia Allamah Muhammad Hussayn Tabatabai listed the necessary qualifications and qualities of an Imam and the office of Imamah while discussing Ayah 2:124 of the Holy Qur'an in his Tafseer Al-Mizan. I will present this list as a brief synopsis of what Imamah entails for Shiaism:

First: Imamah is a Divinely-made status.

Second: The Imam must be ma'sum, by Divine 'ismah; in other words, he must be protected by Allah from sins and errors.

Third: The earth cannot remain without a rightful Imam, as long as there is a man on it.

Fourth: It is essential for an Imam to be supported by the Divine help.

Fifth: The deeds of the people are not hidden from the Imam.

Sixth: The Imam must have knowledge of all that is needed by the people for their good in this world and the next.

Seventh: It is impossible for any other person to surpass the Imam in any virtue.^[25]

In addition to these qualities, the following points may be added:

- The Imam is the tool for obeying Allah, any acts of obedience without accepting the real Imam is useless, and will not be accepted by Allah.
- According to a considerable number of Shia scholars, Imams (and the office of Imamah) have a rank higher than that of the prophets (and the office of Prophethood).

These principles are among the most fundamental of Imamah according to Shiaism. They will be of importance when they are compared with the text and message of the Qur'an. Other scholarly Shia statements with respect to Imamah will also be brought up in the appropriate chapters. Notwithstanding, it is crucial for both the Sunni and Shia readers to realize that Imamah carries a very special meaning in the psyche of the Shia, and that no stone has been left unturned by Shia scholars and writers in their attempts to glorify and sanctify such a position.

QUR'AN AS OUR REFERENCE

I had been encouraged by the two Sunni brothers to look into the Qur'an as my first and primary point of reference when examining the doctrine of Imamah. I had not been thinking about making this sort of comparison before, because Shias rarely use Qur'anic Verses when trying to "prove" the doctrine of Imamah. There is some usage of Verses when trying to show the "superiority" of Ali and the Imams, but even in these cases the focus is quickly shifted to Ahadeeths. I must admit that Sunnis themselves have not written much on the topic of "Imamah and the Qur'an" when answering the Shia claims. Thus, I decided that using the Qur'an was the proper way for me to start judging the correctness of the Imamah doctrine.

Why use the Qur'an as a first reference

There will undoubtedly be those readers who are wondering as to why I would use the Qur'an as the main source of reference when discussing the Shia concept of Imamah. "Should we not refer to the Prophet's Ahadeeths and historical events also?" is a common question in the minds of many people.

In order to answer the concerns of those who may be thinking along those lines, the following points should be considered:

1. The Sunni and Shia faiths have drifted apart considerably when it comes to Ahadeeth and its sciences. The criteria for authenticating Ahadeeth in terms of its isnad (chain of narrators), the textual acceptability

of a given narration (adequacy of its matn), and even what constitutes a “Hadeeth”, are only some of the few important issues that differentiate Sunnis and Shias whenever their respective scholars study and examine a given narration. Such a topic may be of interest for those who have a sound footing in the sciences of Ahadeeth, but the bulk of Sunnis and Shias will not be able to pass correct judgements on these issues.

2. In 14 centuries of Islamic history, there is no book of Ahadeeth that both Sunnis and Shias can agree to and say that it contains only Saheeh Ahadeeth according to their criteria. This is important to note, since scholars normally use a number of related Ahadeeth to interpret a given situation or to arrive at a Fiqhi ruling about a practice.

In view of this reality, the “Lowest Common Denominator” should be found, a work that will be accepted as fully authentic in terms of its message and its integrity by both the Sunni and Shia sides. This book is, of course, the Noble Qur’an. Therefore, the first and most important place to look for resolving big differences of doctrine such as those between the Sunni and Shia faiths should be the Qur’an.

3. It is an established fact that the Qur’an is the main and foremost source of legislation in Islam, superior to Ahadeeth. Thus, a given Hadeeth cannot be accepted if it goes against the meaning of a Qur’anic Verse. Concerning these two principles, the following Shia narrations about the overriding importance of the Qur’an can be presented:

‘If you come across two hadiths related from us[26] then compare them with the book of Allah, what is in concord then take it and what is in disagreement then reject it.’ [27]

‘Whatever comes to you related from us then compare it with the book of Allah, whatever is in concord with it then accept it and what contradicts it then reject it.’[28]

It is the proof of Allah before His creation. He has taken from them a pledge (to act) upon it. He has perfected its effulgence, and completed through it His religion.)[29]

Then, Allah sent to him the Book as a light... Therefore, it is the mine of belief and its centre, the source of knowledge and its oceans, the plantation of justice and its pools, the foundation stone of Islam and its construction...

Allah has made it ... an argument for him who argues with it, a witness for him who quarrels with it, a success for him who argues with it, a carrier of burden for him who seeks the way, a shield for him who arms himself (against misguidance), a knowledge for him who listens carefully, worthy story for him who relates it and a final verdict of him who passes judgements.[30]

From the Sunni side, the following narrations concerning the importance of the Qur’an have been included in the body of Sunni literature:

Narrated 'Uthman: "The best of you is he who learns the Qur'an and teaches it." [31]

“ 'Uqba b. 'Amir reported: When we were in Suffa, the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) came out and said: Which of you would like to go out every morning to Buthan or al-'Aqiq and bring two large she-camels without being guilty of sin or without severing the ties of kinship? We said: Messenger of Allah, we would like to do it. Upon this he said: Does not one of you go out in the morning to the mosque and teach or recite two verses from the Book of Allah. the Majestic and Glorious? That is better for him than two she-camels, and three verses are better

(than three she-camels). and four verses are better for him than four (she-camels), and to on their number in camels.”[32]

“Salim narrated on the authority of his father (Ibn 'Umar) that the Apostle of Allah (may peace be upon him) said: Envy is not justified but in case of two persons only: one who, having been given (knowledge of) the Qur'an by Allah, recites it during the night and day (and also acts upon it) and a man who, having been given wealth by God, spends it during the night and the day (for the welfare of others. seeking the pleasure of the Lord).” [33]

Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said, "Every Prophet was given miracles because of which people believed, but what I have been given, is Divine Inspiration which Allah has revealed to me. So I hope that my followers will outnumber the followers of the other Prophets on the Day of Resurrection." [34]

4. There are those who say that the Qur'an is not easy to understand without the help of the Prophet (or in the case of Shias) an "Imam". While this view does hold partial plausibility, it stands weakened due to the following reasons:

a. The above-cited narrations would not have been uttered by the Prophet or the "Imams" if normal people had a very limited capability of understanding the Qur'an, or if the Qur'an's importance was subservient to other religious scriptures. Rather, the centre of Islamic knowledge would have been the Ahadeeth, with the Qur'an having a secondary role in determining Islamic doctrine.

b. There are Verses in the Qur'an stating in unambiguous terms that the Holy Revelation contains no crookedness in it, is a guide for the believers, and that those who go against the Scripture are in a terrible loss. Some of these Verses are:

(ذَلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ)

This is the Scripture whereof there is no doubt, a guidance unto those who ward off (evil). (Qur'an 2:2)[35]

(ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ نَزَّلَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ وَإِنَّ الَّذِينَ اخْتَلَفُوا فِي الْكِتَابِ لَفِي شِقَاقٍ بَعِيدٍ)

That is because Allah hath revealed the Scripture with the truth. Lo! those who find (a cause of) disagreement in the Scripture are in open schism. (Qur'an 2:176)

(الر كِتَابٌ أُحْكِمَتْ آيَاتُهُ ثُمَّ فُصِّلَتْ مِن لَّدُنْ حَكِيمٍ خَبِيرٍ)

Alif. Lam. Ra. (This is) a Scripture the revelations whereof are perfected and then expounded. (It cometh) from One Wise, Informed (Qur'an 11:1)

(إِنَّ هَٰذَا الْقُرْآنَ يَهْدِي لِلَّتِي هِيَ أَقْوَمُ وَيُبَشِّرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ الَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ الصَّالِحَاتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا كَبِيرًا)

Lo! this Qur'an guideth unto that which is straightest, and giveth tidings unto the believers who do good works that theirs will be a great reward. (Qur'an 17:9)

(الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَى عَبْدِهِ الْكِتَابَ وَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ عِوَجًا . فَيَمَّا لِيُنْذِرَ بَأْسًا شَدِيدًا مِّنْ لَّدُنْهُ وَيُبَشِّرَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ الَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ الصَّالِحَاتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا حَسَنًا)

Praise be to Allah Who hath revealed the Scripture unto His slave, and hath not placed therein any crookedness, (But hath made it) straight, to give warning of stern punishment from Him, and to bring unto the believers who do good works the news that theirs will be a fair reward (Qur'an 18:1-2)

(أَوَلَمْ يَكْفِهِمْ أَنَّا أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ يُتْلَى عَلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَرَحْمَةً وَذِكْرَى لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ)

Is it not enough for them that We have sent down unto thee the Scripture which is read unto them? Lo! herein verily is mercy, and a reminder for folk who believe. (Qur'an 29:51)

(وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا الْقُرْآنَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَكِّرٍ)

And in truth We have made the Qur'an easy to remember; but is there any that remembereth? (Qur'an 54: 17, 22, 32, 40)

5. The issues that will be raised up in this work with respect to the Qur'an and Imamah are, by the will of Allah, those that can be clearly verified and easily understood by any reader, regardless of their religious persuasion.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the Qur'an is used as the primary source in this work. This does not mean that it is the only source: where appropriate, the explanations given by Sunni and Shia scholars for the given Verse will be presented and some Ahadeeths connected with such interpretations will be commented upon. From the Sunni side, the Tafseers of Ibn Kathir (Tafseer al-Qur'an al-Adheem), at-Tabari (Tafseer Jami' il-Bayaan), and al-Qurtubi (Al-Jami' Li-Ahkam il-Qur'an) will be used, as they are among the most respected of Sunni commentaries. From the Shia side, the commentaries of al-Qummi, Allamah al-Kashani's Tafseer al-Safi, Majma-ul-Bayan by at-Tabbarsi, al-Mizan by Allamah Tabatabai, Tafseer at-Tibbyan by at-Tusi, the Tafseer by Grand Ayatullah Makarem Shirazi and the Ayatullah Mahdi Puya/ S.V. Mir Ali English Commentary[36] are appropriate sources of reference. This method is adopted with the aim of showing how the scholars on each side view the Verse, so that a better assessment may be made as to which of the positions is more suitable.

“IMAMS” IN THE QUR'AN

The first phase in seeing how Imamah is treated as a doctrine in the Qur'an was in examining the usage of the terms Imam, Rasul, and Nabi in the Holy Book. (In this chapter the word “Imam” will be looked upon, and in the next chapter the usage of the words “Rasul” and “Nabi” in the Qur'an will be considered)

The reason for examining Imam is that in Shiaism this word is overwhelmingly used while referring to their distinct belief and concept (which in turn is called Imamah, the main sect of Shiaism being called Imamiyah). It is clear to anyone doing a study of Shiaism that the 12 Divine Leaders of the Shia will be referred more often than not as Imam Ali, Imam Husayn, Imam Jafar as-Sadiq, and so on. In some cases, other terminology may be used, but even by going through the few Shia references in the previous pages of this book, it becomes clear that “Holy Imam”, “Infallible Imam”, and so on, is the most common way to

refer to the 12 Imams. Therefore, the researcher is forced to consider how the Qur'an treats this word and whether it relates to the Imamah doctrine or not.

The case is the same with the words Rasul and Nabi. In both Sunnism and Shiaism, the Prophets and Messengers will be referred to as Nabis and Rasools almost every single time, as is evident when Muslims talk of Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). Additionally, belief in the Rasuls/Nabis of Allah is a Usool-e-Din in Shiaism (as was seen earlier, under the name of belief in Nubuwwat), as well as one of the Pillars of Faith in Sunnism. Thus, for the purposes of fairness and equality, all the analysis done on the word "Imam" should also be done on the words "Rasool" and "Nabi".

There are people who object to the belief of Imamah being compared to the belief of Risaalah or Nubuwwah. They think that the comparison should be made between Imamah and Salat, or between Imamah and one of the other Islamic practices. However, if any person were to properly stop and reflect about which belief systems are in harmony with the Qur'an, he/she would realize that comparing Imamah with Nubuwwah/Risalah is the only proper comparison that should be made.

The reason why comparing Imamah with, for example, Salaat is inappropriate is that acceptance of Salaat is subservient to belief in Imamah as far as Shiaism is concerned. That is, a person's obligatory prayers (and all other actions) are invalid if he does not believe in Imamah. Thus, fundamental cornerstones of the religion should be compared with other fundamental cornerstones of the religion in light of the Qur'an, and not with Furoo-e-Din practices (i.e. matters of less importance in comparison with "heart of the religion" issues). Otherwise, any effort done will lead to misleading results and wrong conclusions.

Additionally, when Shias explain their religion, the natural comparison is made between Imams and Prophets. I have never heard of a Shia claiming that "Imams are higher than Fasting" or "Imams are higher than the Day of Judgement". This is never done, and even the thought of making such a comparison is extremely awkward. Rather, the closest principle to Imamah is Prophethood, even in the minds of Shias themselves. This is why we hear Shias asking their learned scholars, "Are Imams higher than Prophets?", or saying, "Imams are chosen by Allah in the same way Prophets are chosen", and so many other statements that are worded in the same fashion.

As can be seen, only a person with very little knowledge of Islam would fail to perceive that Prophethood is the only principle against which we can compare Imamah. No other belief or practice, though it may be of importance, "fits the part" as well as Prophethood does.

Use of Words: Always referring to a Cardinal Belief?

It should be kept in mind that as in any language, the occurrence of a given Arabic word may or may not advocate the concept being advanced.

To make a simple analogy with the English language, the "Lords" in the British Parliament have nothing to do with being Creators or Rulers of the Universe. It represents a title and rank they have achieved, and no one in British society mistakes these "Lords" with the Almighty.

This rule is applied in the Qur'an as well. For example, the term "Rasul" (i.e. Messenger) is used in Surah Yusuf as follows:

(وَقَالَ الْمَلِكُ انْتُونِي بِهِ فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُ الرَّسُولُ قَالَ ارْجِعْ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ فَاسْأَلْهُ مَا بَالُ
النَّسْوَةِ اللَّاتِي قَطَّعْنَ أَيْدِيَهُنَّ إِنَّ رَبِّي بِكَافٍ عَلِيمٌ)

And the king said: Bring him unto me. And when the messenger came unto him, he (Joseph) said: Return unto thy lord and ask him what was the case of the women who cut their hands. Lo! my Lord knoweth their guile. (Qur'an 12:50)

In this case, it can be seen that the Messenger is not a Messenger of Allah, but rather the King's messenger. Another example using the same word can be seen in Surah An-Naml:

(وَإِنِّي مُرْسِلَةٌ إِلَيْهِمْ بِهَدِيَّةٍ فَنَاظِرَةٌ بِمَ يَرْجِعُ الْمُرْسَلُونَ)

But lo! I am going to send a present unto them, and to see with what (answer) the messengers return. (Qur'an 27:35)

Again, the use of "Mursaluun" in this Ayah is not connected with Divine Messengers or Allah's message, but rather with the Queen of Sheeba sending a present to Sulayman (Alayhi Salaam) by means of her ambassadors who are called Messengers in this case.

As a final example, even the word "Rabb" itself is not always synonymous with Allah, as can be observed from the following Verse:

(وَقَالَ لِلَّذِي ظَنَّ أَنَّهُ نَاجٍ مِّنْهُمَا اذْكُرْنِي عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ فَأَنَسَاهُ الشَّيْطَانُ ذِكْرَ رَبِّهِ
فَلَبِثَ فِي السَّجْنِ بِضْعَ سِنِينَ)

And he said unto him of the twain who he knew would be released: Mention me in the presence of thy lord. But Satan caused him to forget to mention it to his lord, so he (Joseph) stayed in prison for some years. (Qur'an 12:42)

So in this case, the "Lord" is nothing more than a title used to refer to the King of the Land, though it was understood by the user (i.e. Prophet Yusuf (Alayhi Salaam)) that the King had no relationship with Allah's Sovereignty or Majesty as the True Lord.

Moving to the word "Imam", the term itself has a connotation of a leader or guide. For example, the Sunnis use this title to refer to countless scholars of the past and present. In the world of Shiaism, we also see that the revered religious leaders are sometimes termed as "Imams", even though they really do not have the qualities of Divine Imamate in them, but are rather seen as leaders and guides in a general sense.

For instance, the leader of the Iranian Revolution, Ayatullah Khomeini, was and is routinely called Imam Khomeini, even though his leadership qualities were not divinely granted, nor did the Shias see him as an Infallible Imam. Likewise, the followers of Ayatullah Muhammad Shirazi refer to him as Imam Muhammad Shirazi, and the followers of Ayatullah Muhammad Sadiq As-Sadr still refer to him today as Imam Muhammad As-Sadr. The same can be said for many other Shia scholars of the past and present who have a large popular following. In the minds of the Shias using the term "Imam" to refer to these Ayatullahs, it is clear that "Imam" means a "Leader" and "Guide" in general terms, and not in any specific manner with theological ramifications.

These differences are worthy to mention. There is a need to determine how many times when the words "Imam", "Rasool", or "Nabi" are mentioned in the Qur'an they are used to refer to the ideology and belief after which they are named, and how many times they do not point to the ideology/belief.

Examining the Word Imam in the Qur'an

The first job to undertake is to examine the usage of the word "Imam" in order to determine how much of it is in agreement with the Shia doctrine of Imamah, and how much of it (if any) is in disagreement, or refers to Imams in a different sense altogether.

The person wishing to do research in this field will discover that the frequency of the term Imam is quite low in comparison with the huge weight given to it by the Shia faith. It certainly struck me as odd that Allah is mentioned thousands of times in the Holy Book, while Imam and its plural Aimmah occur no more than a dozen distinct times.

Still, low frequency does not automatically mean that the belief is not in the Qur'an. Thus, it was my responsibility to go through the occurrences of this term to discover how many times the word's usage agrees with Shia ideology.

The twelve instances of the word "Imam" in the Qur'an can be classified under nine categories:

- "Imam" referring to a road or highway
- "Imam" referring to the Book of Musa
- Evil leaders as "Imams"
- "Imam" meaning the Preserved Tablet
- "Imams" with respect to the Israelites
- "Imams" as general leadership of the pious
- The Day of Judgement and "Imams"
- Ishaq (Alayhi Salaam), and Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) as "Imams"
- "Imam for mankind": Ibrahim and Imamah

The first three categories (which comprise 5 Ayahs between them) clearly do not refer to an "Infallible Divinely Appointed Imam" in any manner. A survey of all the major Sunni and Shia commentaries would show this, and there is no need to discuss these instances at length save for a mention of their occurrence and a summary of the commentaries with respect to their meaning.

The latter six categories will cause more argumentation and discussion between Shias and Sunnis, since at least some Shia commentaries try to portray the word "Imam" to mean "Infallible Imam" (i.e. as Imam in the theological religious sense). However, even in these cases, the Shia arguments stand weakened for reasons that will be explored in the respective instances.

In any case, the occurrences of the word "Imam" will be dealt with by category, with the most appropriate conclusion being drawn from the evidences put forward by both the Sunni and Shia sides.

Category one: "And they were on a Clear Imam"... Roads and Imams

Allah says in the Qur'an:

(فَانْتَقَمْنَا مِنْهُمْ وَإِنَّهُمَا لَبِإِمَامٍ مُّبِينٍ)

So we took vengeance on them; and lo! they both are on a high-road plain to see.

(Qur'an 15:79)

As anyone can easily perceive, in this Ayah the word “Imam” means a road or highway. It has no relation with Imam as an Infallible leader, let alone a Divinely appointed human. A brief look at the Sunni and Shia commentaries of this Verse will reveal this fact:

Sunni commentaries of Ayah 15:79

In the al-Qurtubi Tafseer, the only view put forward is that the “Imamin Mubin” refers to a road that is clear in and of itself, the road being in the way of the Cities of Lut (Alayhi Salaam) and the People of Aikah (i.e. the people to whom Shuaib (Alayhi Salaam) was sent). The comment is then made that they serve as a reminder and warning to all those who pass through it.[37] Ibn Kathir gives a similar view, quoting (among others) Ibn Abbas (Radhia Allahu Anhu). According to Ibn Kathir, this is the reason why Shuaib (Alayhi Salaam) when warning his people, said: “nor are the people of Lut far off from you!” (Qur’an 11:89).[38] We again see a similar opinion from Tafseer at-Tabari[39], and other Sunni commentaries echo the same general line of thinking with respect to the meaning of this Verse.

Shia commentaries of Ayah 15:79

A look into the Shia Tafseers will show that Shia commentators also did not view this Ayah as a “proof” for Imamah.

For example, in the Tafseer al-Safi, Allamah al-Kashani says that the “Imamin Mubin” refers to a clear road that is followed and leads (i.e. leads the people during their journeys). [40]

Similarly, in Majma-ul-Bayan, a number of views are presented. The first two views are similar to the view expressed by al-Qurtubi, that the Cities of Lut (Alayhi Salaam) and the Aikah were on a clear road that was followed by the people (and that this is why it was named as Imam). In addition to this, another possibility is presented, namely that their Cities (or the stories surrounding those cities) has been preserved in the Lauhul-Mahfudh, the Great Book in which Allah has recorded all happenings of the World until the Day of Judgement. As a similar example, Ayah 36:12 is presented, where Allah says: “and of all things have We taken account in a clear Book (of evidence).”[41] (This view is significant, since it will come up again when this particular Ayah is analyzed).

Also, the al-Mizan commentary by Allamah Tabatabai gives a similar assessment with respect to the meaning of the word “Imam” in this particular case, saying that the “Imam” refers to a clear path or road on which the peoples of Lut (Alayhi Salaam) and Shuaib (Alayhi Salaam) used to reside.[42]

Thus, with respect to Ayah 15:79, it can be concluded that the term “Imamin Mubin” does not advance the Shia concept of Imamah in the least, as can be deduced from going through the Sunni and Shia commentaries with respect to this Verse.

Category Two: Book of Musa as Imam

The second category of the word “Imam” occurs with respect to the Book of Musa as a guide and example. Allah says in the Holy Qur’an:

(أَفَمَنْ كَانَ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّهِ وَيَتْلُوهُ شَاهِدٌ مِّنْهُ وَمِنْ قَبْلِهِ كِتَابُ مُوسَىٰ إِمَامًا
وَرَحْمَةً أُولَٰئِكَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ وَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِهِ مِنَ الْأَحْزَابِ فَالنَّارُ مَوْعِدُهُ فَلَا تَكُ فِي
مِرْيَةٍ مِّنْهُ إِنَّهُ الْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكَ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ)

Is he (to be counted equal with them) who relieth on a clear proof from his Lord, and a witness from Him reciteth it, and before it was the Book of Moses, an example and a mercy? Such believe therein, and whoso

disbelieveth therein of the clans, the Fire is his appointed place. So be not thou in doubt concerning it. Lo! it is the Truth from thy Lord; but most of mankind believe not. (Qur'an 11:17)

the Holy Qur'an also states:

(وَمِنْ قَبْلِهِ كِتَابُ مُوسَى إِمَامًا وَرَحْمَةً وَهَذَا كِتَابٌ مُصَدِّقٌ لِّسَانِ عَرَبِيٍّ لِّيُنذِرَ
الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا وَيُبَشِّرَ لِّلْمُحْسِنِينَ)

When before it there was the Scripture of Moses, an example and a mercy; and this is a confirming Scripture in the Arabic language, that it may warn those who do wrong and bring good tidings for the righteous. (Qur'an 46:12)

The reader can easily perceive that these two Ayahs refer to a Book as a guide, and not to an Infallible human Imam. The Sunni and Shia commentaries of these Verses confirm this fact.

Sunni Commentaries of Ayahs 11:17 and 46:12

With respect to the first Ayah (11:17), Ibn Kathir's position with respect to the usage of the Word "Imam" is:

This means that Allah, the Exalted, revealed it to that Ummah[43] as a leader for them and a guide for them to follow, as a mercy from Allah upon them. Therefore, whoever believed in it with true faith, then it would lead him to believe in the Qur'an as well.[44]

The Tafseers of at-Tabari and al-Qurtubi give a similar viewpoint, that the Imam being referred to in here is the Taurah that was revealed to Moses, as it was a Guide for the Banu Israil.[45]

With respect to the use of the word "Imam" in Verse 46:12, at-Tabari in his Tafseer again puts forward the meaning by which the Book of Musa is the guide for the Bani Israil.[46] In the al-Qurtubi Tafseer, virtually the same viewpoint is shown, although the additional point is made that it refers to only a part of the Taurah, since there has been human manipulation of the original revelation.[47]

Shia commentaries of Ayahs 11:17 and 46:12

It should be noted that most of the Shia Tafseers with respect to Ayah 11:17 concentrate not on the meaning of the word Imam, but rather on whom is the "Shaahid" or Witness being referred to in here, as they portray the witness in this case to be Ali. Since the term Imam is the focus of discussion, there is no need to deviate into this matter. The few comments that are given with respect to this word fall in line with the conclusions made by the Sunni commentators. For example, in Majma-ul-Bayan, Allamah at-Tabbarsi presents the word "Imam" in the context of the Book of Musa being followed in the matters of religion.[48]

Likewise, with respect to Ayah 46:12, the "Imam" is also understood to mean that the Book of Musa was revealed as a Guide for those who followed it. This is the view of such Shia commentaries as Majma-ul-Bayan and Tafseer at-Tibbyan by Allamah at-Tusi.[49]

Taking everything into consideration, it can be perceived that the Verses under discussion do not support the viewpoint of Shiaism about "Infallible Imams", since in this case the "Imam" is the Book revealed to Musa (Alayhi Salaam) and does not refer to humans.

Category three: Evil leaders as "Imams"

The Holy Qur'an presents two cases in which "Imams" are mentioned as being evil leaders or leaders calling to Hellfire. These Verses are presented below:

(وَإِنْ تَكُونُوا أَيْمَانَهُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ عَهْدِهِمْ وَطَعْنُوا فِي دِينِكُمْ فَقَاتِلُوا أَيْمَةَ الْكُفْرِ إِنَّهُمْ لَا أَيْمَانَ لَهُمْ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَنْتَهُونَ)

And if they break their pledges after their treaty (hath been made with you) and assail your religion, then fight the heads of disbelief - Lo! they have no binding oaths - in order that they may desist. (Qur'an 9:12)

(وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَيْمَةً يَدْعُونَ إِلَى النَّارِ وَيَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ لَا يُنصَرُونَ)

And We made them patterns that invite unto the Fire, and on the Day of Resurrection they will not be helped. (Qur'an 28:41)

Such "Imams" cannot possibly fulfil the requirements of "Infallible Divine Imamah", since the people referred to in here are evil and wicked. A glance at the Sunni and Shia commentaries with respect to these Verses further demonstrates this fact.

Sunni and Shia interpretations of Ayah 9:12

Sunni and Shia interpretations differ as to who these "Imams of Kufr" are in terms of specificity. Notwithstanding, they both agree that it cannot refer to any "Infallible" Guide.

From the Sunni side, Ibn Kathir gives several possibilities as to who these people are. One of them is that the "Imams of Kufr" refers to Abu Jahl, Utbah, Shaybah, Ummayah bin Khalaf, and other men from among the leaders of the polytheists in Makkah. According to Ibn Kathir, this Ayah is general, even if the reason for revealing it was the fighting of Quraishi polytheists who had broken the oaths they had taken with the Prophet of Islam (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). A similar set of views can be seen from other Sunni interpretations such as Tafseer al-Qurtubi and Tafseer at-Tabari.[50]

The Shia interpretations are quite different with respect to who is being alluded to in this Verse. For example, in the Tafseer al-Qumi, it is said that it is the people whom Ali fought in the Battle of Jamal (such as Ayesha, Talha, Zubair) whom are being referred to in this Verse as the "Leaders of Kufr". This view is also the position of Kashani in his Tafseer al-Safi, and in other Shia interpretations. The Majma-ul-Bayan Tafseer is more open about the possibilities, including the people of the Battle of Jamal as an option, but also mentioning the polytheists of Quraysh, and the people of Persia and Byzantine.[51]

With respect to the Shia interpretations, it is not proper to indulge into a lengthy discussion about who are the people this Verse really refers to, what are the faults in the Shia interpretation about this Verse referring to Ayesha, Talha and Zubair, and other related issues, especially not for this book. Thus, it will be noted that interpreters from both the Sunni and Shia sides have generally agreed that the "Imams" being referred to in here have nothing to do infallibility or good character, but rather refer to evil individuals (whatever the embodiment of an evil individual may be for the respective faith).

Sunni and Shia interpretations of Ayah 28:41

Ayah 28:41 is another Verse where a human "Imam" is being referred to, though in this case it is also obvious that the "Leaders" are evil people "inviting to the Fire". Reading the context of this Verse, we discover who exactly these "Imams" are:

(وَقَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ يَا أَيُّهَا الْمَلَأُ مَا عَلِمْتُ لَكُمْ مِنْ إِلَهٍ غَيْرِي فَأَوْقِدْ لِي يَا هَامَانَ عَلَى
الطِّينِ فَاجْعَلْ لِي صَرْحًا لَعَلِّي أَطَّلِعُ إِلَى إِلَهِ مُوسَى وَإِنِّي لأظنُّهُ مِنَ الْكَاذِبِينَ
. وَاسْتَكْبَرَ هُوَ وَجُنُودُهُ فِي الْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ الْحَقِّ وَظَنُّوا أَنَّهُم إِلَيْنَا لَا يُرْجَعُونَ
. فَأَخَذْنَاهُ وَجُنُودَهُ فَنَبَذْنَاهُمْ فِي الْيَمِّ فَانَظَرُ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الظَّالِمِينَ . وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ
أُيُمَةً يَدْعُونَ إِلَى النَّارِ وَيَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ لَا يُنصَرُونَ .

وَأَتْبَعْنَاهُمْ فِي هَذِهِ الدُّنْيَا لَعْنَةً وَيَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ هُمْ مِنَ الْمَقْبُوحِينَ)

And Pharaoh said: O chiefs! I know not that ye have a god other than me, so kindle for me (a fire), O Haman, to bake the mud; and set up for me a lofty tower in order that I may survey the god of Moses; and lo! I deem him of the liars. And he and his hosts were haughty in the land without right, and deemed that they would never be brought back to Us. Therefore We seized him and his hosts, and abandoned them unto the sea. Behold the nature of the consequence for evil-doers! And We made them patterns that invite unto the Fire, and on the Day of Resurrection they will not be helped. And We made a curse to follow them in this world, and on the Day of Resurrection they will be among the hateful. (Qur'an 28:38-42)

Thus, the “Imams” in this case are Firaun, his chieftains and army. The Verse does not support in any way the Shia concept of Imamah, as it is similar to Ayah 9:12 discussed above.

All the major Sunni interpretations point to this obvious truth, that Firaun and the others mentioned in this Ayah as “Imams” are leaders who lead to disbelief, and who called the people towards the practices that would lead them to Hellfire.[52]

From the Shia viewpoint, the same assessment has been made about this Verse. For example, Allamah Tabatabai in his Tafsir al-Mizan says that the “Imam” in this case refers to the fact that Firaun put his own rulings and judgments above the rulings and judgments of Allah (This is from a Hadeeth quoted in Shia sources and in other Shia Tafseers as well).[53]

So yet again, the Verses under discussion do not support the viewpoint of Shiaism with respect to Imamah, as the “Imams” being referred to are in fact leaders inviting to sin and Hellfire.

Category four: The Preserved Tablet as “Imam”

The word “Imam” also occurs in the following Ayah, where Allah mentions the recording of deeds:

(إِنَّا نَحْنُ نُحْيِي الْمَوْتَى وَنَكْتُبُ مَا قَدَّمُوا وَآثَارَهُمْ وَكُلَّ شَيْءٍ أَحْصَيْنَاهُ فِي إِمَامٍ
مُبِينٍ)

Lo! We it is Who bring the dead to life. We record that which they send before them, and their footprints. And all things We have kept in a clear Register. (Qur'an 36:12)

Sunni interpretations of Ayah 36:12

The critical phrase in here is “Imamin Mubin”. Sunni Tafseers in general say that it refers to the “Lauhul Mahfudh”, the Preserved Tablet in which all deeds have been written. This is the view of at-Tabari in his Tafseer, and one of the views in the Tafseer of al-Qurtubi. Other possibilities are also mentioned, such as the “Imamim Mubin” refers to the individual book of records of each person.[54]

Shia interpretations of Ayah 36:12

The top Shia commentaries of Majma-ul-Bayan by Allamah at-Tabbarsi and at-Tibbyan by Shaykh at-Tusi also echo this view, and do not present any “human Imam” as a possibility in this case. Allamah Tabatabai in the Tafseer al-Mizan also mentions this as the best possible meaning for this phrase. In addition, Ayatullah Makarem Shirazi in his commentary mentions the Preserved Tablet as his view of what “Imamin Mubin” refers to in this Verse.[55]

Given all these evidences there should not be much discussion about this Verse, since the “Imam” clearly refers to a Book. However, some Shias disagree, and contend that it refers to “Infallible Imams” (or specifically to Ali), who have knowledge of everything. With respect to this Ayah, Shias defending their position report the following narration:

Imam Muhammad bin Ali al Baqir said that when this verse was revealed, Abu Bakr and Umar asked the Holy Prophet: "Is Imamum mubin the Tawrat given to Musa?" The answer was: "No". Again they asked: "Is it Injil, given to Isa?" The answer was: "No". Then they asked: "Is it the Holy Qur'an?" "No", was the answer. Then turning towards Ali ibn abi Talib, the Holy Prophet said: "Verily this is the Imam in whom Allah has deposited the knowledge of everything."...[56]

For the study of this possibility to be carried out, it is necessary to consider two terms: “Ahssa” and “Kitaabun Mubin”. These two terms will be fundamental for understanding this Verse, and why it does not suit the Imams of the Shia faith.

Recording, “Ahssa” in the Qur’an

One of the words of interest is “Ahssa” or recording. It is important to see the instances in which this word is used, since it will shed light on how the Qur’an uses it in other circumstances:

(وَوَضِعَ الْكِتَابُ فَتَرَى الْمُجْرِمِينَ مُشْفِقِينَ مِمَّا فِيهِ وَيَقُولُونَ يَا وَيْلَتَنَا مَالِ هَذَا الْكِتَابِ لَا يُغَادِرُ صَغِيرَةً وَلَا كَبِيرَةً إِلَّا أَحْصَاهَا)

And the Book is placed, and thou seest the guilty fearful of that which is therein, and they say: What kind of a Book is this that leaveth not a small thing nor a great thing but hath counted it! And they find all that they did confronting them, and thy Lord wrongeth no-one. (Qur’an 18:49)

(لَقَدْ أَحْصَاهُمْ وَعَدَّهُمْ عَدًّا)

Verily He knoweth them and numbereth them with (right) numbering. (Qur’an 19:94)

(يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ إِذَا طَلَقْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ فَطَلِّقُوهُنَّ لِعَدَّتِهِنَّ وَأَحْصُوا الْعِدَّةَ)

O Prophet! When ye (men) put away women, put them away for their (legal) period and reckon the period... (Qur’an 65:1)

(لِيَعْلَمَ أَنْ قَدْ أَبْلَغُوا رَسُولَاتِ رَبِّهِمْ وَأَحَاطَ بِمَا لَدَيْهِمْ وَأَحْصَى كُلَّ شَيْءٍ عَدَدًا)

That He may know that they have indeed conveyed the messages of their Lord. He surroundeth all their doings, and He keepeth count of all things. (Qur'an 72:28)

(وَكُلَّ شَيْءٍ أَحْصَيْنَاهُ كِتَابًا)

Everything have We recorded in a Book. (Qur'an 78:29)

The usage of the root word “Ahssa” and its related terms in all these cases signifies writing and recording of matters, not on people or angels, but on tablets and books. Attempting to establish a connection between this term and Ali (or any other human being) is incorrect. The word “Ahssa” is not used in the Qur'an even once to refer to “writing on people”, so it is very strange how it can suddenly refer to writing on an “Infallible Imam”.

Clear Book, “Kitaabun Mubin” in the Qur'an

Another topic that should be looked into is how the Qur'an addresses the fact that Allah has recorded everything. Is it in a person or a Book? The following Ayahs presented below give overwhelming weight to the argument that Allah always equates the recording of everything with a Book:

(وَعِنْدَهُ مَفَاتِحُ الْغَيْبِ لَا يُعَلِّمُهَا إِلَّا هُوَ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَمَا تَسْقُطُ مِنْ وَرَقَةٍ إِلَّا يَعْلَمُهَا وَلَا حَبَّةٌ فِي ظِلْمَاتِ الْأَرْضِ وَلَا رَطْبٌ وَلَا يَابِسٌ إِلَّا فِي كِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ)

And with Him are the keys of the Invisible. None but He knoweth them. And He knoweth what is in the land and the sea. Not a leaf falleth but He knoweth it, not a grain amid the darkness of the earth, naught of wet or dry but (it is noted) in a clear record. (Qur'an 6:59)

(وَمَا يَعْزُبُ عَنْ رَبِّكَ مِنْ مِثْقَالِ ذَرَّةٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا فِي السَّمَاءِ وَلَا أَصْغَرَ مِنْ ذَلِكَ وَلَا أَكْبَرَ إِلَّا فِي كِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ)

And not an atom's weight in the earth or in the sky escapeth your Lord, nor what is less than that or greater than that, but it is (written) in a clear Book. (Qur'an 10:61)

(وَمَا مِنْ دَابَّةٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ إِلَّا عَلَى اللَّهِ رِزْقُهَا وَيَعْلَمُ مُسْتَقَرَّهَا وَمُسْتَوْدَعَهَا كُلٌّ فِي كِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ)

And there is not a beast in the earth but the sustenance thereof dependeth on Allah. He knoweth its habitation and its repository. All is in a clear Record. (Qur'an 11:6)

(وَمَا مِنْ غَائِبَةٍ فِي السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ إِلَّا فِي كِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ)

And there is nothing hidden in the heaven or the earth but it is in a clear Record. (Qur'an 27:75)

(لَا يَعْزُبُ عَنْهُ مِثْقَالُ ذَرَّةٍ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَلَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا أَصْغَرُ مِنْ ذَلِكَ وَلَا أَكْبَرُ إِلَّا فِي كِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ)

Those who disbelieve say: The Hour will never come unto us. Say: Nay, by my Lord, but it is coming unto you surely. (He is) the Knower of the Unseen. Not an atom's weight, or less than that or greater, escapeth Him in the heavens or in the earth, but it is in a clear Record (Qur'an 34:3)

The explicit phrase “Kitaabun Mubin” (Clear Book) has been used on a number of occasions in the Qur'an. Its purpose is to describe the recording of all details in a Book, which all sides agree is the Lauhul Mahfudh. Therefore, it is difficult for the objective person to see how this general form of address would change suddenly for the Verse under consideration (Ayah 36:12), especially since there is no further indication or hint in the Verse that would lead the reader to believe that it refers to an “Infallible Imam”.

How are things “written” on People?

It is also important to note the differences between the ways a thing are written in a Book, and the way it would be stored in someone's knowledge.

It was already seen which words are used to describe the writing of something into a Book or a Record. In the case of giving knowledge to a human being, the case is entirely different. We have the example of Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) and the revelations and knowledge that came to him. Allah in these cases uses altogether different words, such as “Nuheeh” (inspired) or “Nazal” (revealed). The Qur'an states:

(تِلْكَ مِنْ أَنْبَاءِ الْغَيْبِ نُوحِيهَا إِلَيْكَ)

This is of the tidings of the Unseen which We inspire in thee (Muhammad). (Qur'an 11:49)

(وَإِنَّهُ لَنَنْزِيلُ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ . نَزَلَ بِهِ الرُّوحُ الْأَمِينُ . عَلَى قَلْبِكَ لِتَكُونَ مِنَ الْمُنْذِرِينَ)

And lo! it is a revelation of the Lord of the Worlds, Which the True Spirit hath brought down Upon thy heart, that thou mayst be (one) of the warners (Qur'an 26:192-194)

Numerous other examples, both in relation with Prophets as well as with other humans can be found in the Qur'an. In all these cases, the word “Nuheeh” (inspired) is used to describe how Allah sends knowledge to them, while “Tanzil” signifies a special revelation of a Divine Book, such as the Qur'an to Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). If the real meaning of Verse 36:12 was to show that Ali (Radhia Allahu Anhu) was the one in whom Allah had stored all knowledge, the more appropriate manner to mention it would be to say that such things had been “inspired” onto his heart. Again, the structure of the Verse does not conform to the established cases where Allah reveals and inspires things to His servants.

To sum up the discussion with respect to Verse 36:12, the assertion by some Shias that the “Imam” in this case refers to Ali (Radhia Allahu Anhu) is incorrect due to the following reasons:

- It is clear that Sunni commentaries and most Shia commentaries have concluded that the “Imamin Mubin” refers to the Preserved Tablet (the Lauhul Mahfudh) or to the individual record of every person's deeds.

- The other instances of the word “Ahssa” and the phrase “Kitaabun Mubin” all refer to writing and recording things in a physical Book or register, not on a person.
- The manner in which a person is given knowledge is quite different from the manner in which things are recorded in a Book, as the person is revealed or inspired with knowledge upon his heart.

Category five: Israelites as “Imams”

Next, two Verses where the term “Aimmah” (plural of Imams) has been used with respect to the Children of Israel are presented. The Verses read as follows:

(وَنُرِيدُ أَنْ نَمُنَّ عَلَى الَّذِينَ اسْتُضْعِفُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَنَجْعَلَهُمْ أَئِمَّةً وَنَجْعَلَهُمُ الْوَارِثِينَ)

And We desired to show favour unto those who were oppressed in the earth, and to make them examples and to make them the inheritors (Qur'an 28:5)

(وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ فَلَا تَكُن فِي مِرْيَةٍ مِّنْ لِّقَائِهِ وَجَعَلْنَاهُ هُدًى لِّبَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ . وَجَعَلْنَا مِنْهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا لَمَّا صَبَرُوا وَكَانُوا بِآيَاتِنَا يُوقِنُونَ)

We verily gave Moses the Scripture; so be not ye in doubt of his receiving it; and We appointed it a guidance for the Children of Israel. And when they became steadfast and believed firmly in Our revelations, We appointed from among them leaders who guided by Our command. (Qur'an 32:23-24)

In some of my previous discussions with Shias, I had seen these couple of Verses being used with the intention of showing that “Imamah of the 12 Imams” had been conclusively shown in the Qur'an. Notwithstanding, this is not the case, as the Verses talk about the Israelites as “Imams”. For example, a quick glance at the context of Ayah 28:5 shows what the true meaning of this Verse is:

(نَنْتَلُوا عَلَيْكَ مِنْ نَّبَأِ مُوسَى وَفِرْعَوْنَ بِالْحَقِّ لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ . إِنَّ فِرْعَوْنَ عَلَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَجَعَلَ أَهْلَهَا شِيَعًا يَسْتَضْعِفُ طَائِفَةً مِّنْهُمْ يُذَبِّحُ أَبْنَاءَهُمْ وَيَسْتَحْيِي نِسَاءَهُمْ إِنَّهُ كَانَ مِنَ الْمُفْسِدِينَ . وَنُرِيدُ أَنْ نَمُنَّ عَلَى الَّذِينَ اسْتُضْعِفُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَنَجْعَلَهُمْ أَئِمَّةً وَنَجْعَلَهُمُ الْوَارِثِينَ . وَنُكِّنَ لَهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَنُرِي فِرْعَوْنَ وَهَامَانَ وَجُنُودَهُمَا مِنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يَحْذَرُونَ)

We narrate unto thee (somewhat) of the story of Moses and Pharaoh with truth, for folk who believe. Lo! Pharaoh exalted himself in the earth and made its people castes. A tribe among them he oppressed, killing their sons and sparing their women. Lo! he was of those who work corruption. And We desired to show favour unto those who were oppressed in the earth, and to make them examples and to make them the inheritors, And to establish them in the earth, and to show Pharaoh and Haman and their hosts that which they feared from them. (Qur'an 28:3-6)

A survey of the Sunni and Shia commentaries into these two Ayahs further shows that the “Imamah” being referred to in these cases cannot possibly signify “Infallible Imamah”.

Sunni commentaries of Ayahs 28:5 and 32:24

With respect to Ayah 28:5, the Sunni commentaries take the position that the “Imamah” being alluded to in here is the Kingdom that the Children of Israel were about to be granted and which they would take over from Firaun. This is the view expressed in Tafseer at-Tabari, and in Tafseer al-Qurtubi, where this Ayah is compared to Musa’s (Alayhi Salaam) statement directed towards the Bani Israel in Verse 5:20: “and He made you kings” (وجعلكم ملوكا).[57]

Concerning Ayah 32:24, the Sunni commentaries such as at-Tabari and al-Qurtubi take the position that the “Imams” mean leaders. There is some difference of opinion as to whether they refer to Prophets or religious people and scholars, but none of the top Sunni commentaries considered these “Imams” to be a distinct type of people with a special rank and position separate from Prophets and scholars.[58]

Shia commentaries of Ayah 28:5

The Shia commentaries are understandably more inclined towards presenting the “Imams” in these Ayahs as meaning “Infallible Imams”. However, as I went through these interpretations, I began to see that there was a difference between what the Shia scholars were trying to present with respect to these Verses and what Allah had revealed, considering the context of the Ayahs and the Shia beliefs. Moreover, some of the interpretations showed that these passages were in effect contradicting Shia Imami beliefs.

With respect to Verse 28:5, the first thing I noticed is the attempt to draw a direct analogy between the Children of Israel being made Imams and the 12 Imams of the Shia faith. For example, in the Majma-ul-Bayan Tafseer, a narration attributed to the Imams says that the favoured ones from among the Ahl-ul-Bayt and their Shias are in the same position as Musa and his Shias, and the enemies of the Ahl-ul-Bayt are in the same position as Firaun and his helpers.[59]

Moreover, in the al-Qummi Tafseer, a similar opinion is presented. It is stated that in the same way Firaun was utterly punished after having put the Banu Israil through hardships, so the Imam Mahdi will punish all the enemies of the Ahl-ul-Bayt when he returns, this after Allah resurrects all these people back to Earth for their punishment to be carried out. The interpretations from al-Tusi and al-Kashani with regard to Ayah 28:5 are similar in tone to al-Qummi’s interpretation.[60]

There are a number of problems with this type of reasoning in terms of trying to equate the suffering of the Bani Israil with the suffering of the Imams of the Shia faith:

1. The Ayah clearly states that the Bani Israil as a whole were made “Imams” on Earth. Thus, the entire tribe is given the position of Imamah in this verse. Comparing it with other Qur’anic Ayahs about the Children of Israel, we see that it closely resembles Verses such as:

(قَالُوا أُوذِينَا مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ تَأْتِيَنَا وَمِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جِئْتَنَا قَالَ عَسَى رَبُّكُمْ أَنْ يُهْلِكَ عَذُّكُمْ وَيَسْتَخْلِفَكُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرَ كَيْفَ تَعْمَلُونَ)

They[61] said: We suffered hurt before thou camest unto us, and since thou hast come unto us. He[62] said: It may be that your Lord is going to destroy your adversary and make you viceroys in the earth, that He may see how ye behave. (Qur’an 7:129)

We see that the position of vicegerency and dominion does not refer in here to a perfect infallible leadership, but rather a leadership where the people are judged for their actions; hence the statement: “that He (Allah) may see how ye behave”.

Thus, the placement of “Imamah” in the hands of the Children of Israel in this Verse is similar to the dominion and leadership that Allah may bestow upon any people after rescuing them from their oppressors.

It cannot refer to a special form of Imamah simply because the population as a whole is granted this Imamah, and they are responsible for the good and bad actions they commit once they are placed under this position.

2. Supposing that the term “Aimmah” is being used to make an indirect analogy with the Imams of the Shia faith, I was further puzzled due to the following:

a. The freedom and victory of the Shia religion and of their Imams has not come yet. Rather, the Awaited Imam Mahdi is the one who, according to the interpretations provided above, will return to exact punishment from the enemies of the Imams and establish himself as the rightful ruler on Earth. This is because he is the true Imam, and his victory comes due to his divine position. However, in the situation of the Children of Israel, being made “Imams” came because of their freedom and victory over Firaun. This can clearly be seen from the context of the Verse, and it is difficult to analyze this any other way.

b. Looking at the Israelites situation, we see that before their deliverance from the punishment of Firaun, they were not Leaders or Imams in any sense. Again, applying the same logic to the case of the Shia Imams, it would be necessary to say that the first 11 Imams were not in reality “Imams”, because they lived at a time before the deliverance and rescue of their people (i.e the Shias) arrived.

Considering all the facets of “Infallible Imamah” that this Verse goes against, the proper way to look at the message of this Ayah is that it speaks of an “Imamah” that is fundamentally different than the one promoted by Shias.

Shia commentaries of Ayah 32:24

With respect to Ayah 32:24, the Shia interpretations also go further than the Sunni commentaries and give the impression that the “Imams” being mentioned here are “Divinely Appointed Infallible Imams”. For example, this is the view from Allamah Tabatabai in his Tafseer al-Mizan, as he connects it with two other Ayahs (2:124 and 21:73, which will be discussed later in this chapter) where the word Imam is also used.[63]

While this Verse may seem to support the Imamah concept as understood by Shias, a further look into it reveals that in effect this Ayah contradicts the precepts and conditions of an Imam in Shiaism. It is crucial to comprehend this inconsistency, since it shows that Shia commentaries sometimes use flawed logic to advance their belief in Imamah.

The specific objection concerns the phrase “And when they became steadfast and believed firmly in Our revelations, We appointed from among them leaders” found in the Verse. This passage very clearly presents the direct relationship between the patience and steadfastness of the Children of Israel and Allah’s appointing of Imams.

However, the Shia view of Imamah is that the people’s attitudes, beliefs, acceptance, or even physical recognition of an Imam have no role to play in Allah appointing an Imam, because Allah chooses whom He sees fit without need for people’s input in this matter. Again quoting what Allamah Musavi Lari said in “Imamate and Leadership”: “The Shi’ah are committed to the principle that the right to designate the Imam belongs exclusively to God, and that the people have no role to play in this respect.”[64]

Similarly, Allamah Tabatabai himself said in his work “Shia”: “Human society can never be without the figure whom Shi’ism calls the Imam whether or not he is recognized and known.”[65]

While the Verse places the patience and belief of the Children of Israel as a prerequisite before Allah appointed “Imams” for them, the Shia belief states the complete independence between the appointing of

Imams and the conditions of a society. Thus, there is an irreconcilable clash between what Allah has explicitly said in this Verse and the Shia belief.

Sometimes, the Shia interpretations themselves do take note of this issue. For example, Ayatullah Makarem Shirazi says in his Tafseer:

The above verse (NO.24), implies that, Allah had appointed Divine leaders to guide the Israelites by His order. The apostles like; Daniel-Ezra-Nehemiah-Job-Ezekiel-Jonah-and Zacharia, and also the kings such as Solomon, David, Jashua, guided the Israelites according to the Mosaic Law, so long as the people were faithful and obedient to their Lord!

When the conditions changed, and people broke up into sects, and fell at variances and wrangling, they lost all their dignities, and suffered national annihilation. They scattered here and there round about the globe, and it seems that they will have to remain so, up to the Resurrection Day.[66]

Another interesting interpretation we find is from Allamah at-Tusi. In his Tafseer at-Tibbyan, he quotes a view in which Allah promises the Children of Israil that if they are patient, he will make them Imams. Thus, when they became patient in their religion, Imamah was granted to them.[67]

However, in Shia ideology, the Imam does not need to show anything in terms of faith, patience, or any other virtuous quality, because he is already infallible and perfected in all these aspects from the very beginning of his life. As Allamah Sayyid Akhtar Rizvi says, "Imamate is not an acquired job; it is a 'designation' bestowed by Allah".[68] I was perplexed as to why some Shias would use this Verse as a proof for Imamah in spite of all the inconsistencies between the "Infallible Imamah" system of Shias and the message of this Ayah. Like in the discussion surrounding the previous Ayah, the only logical option is to concede that this Verse speaks of "Imams" in a manner different from the theological sense upheld by Shias.

So again, it is seen that Ayahs with the word "Imam" or "Aimmah" in them do not advance the Shia beliefs with respect to the belief in Imamah. Indeed, as far as these Verses are concerned, it raises doubts as to whether there is a true correspondence between the words of some Shia scholars and what Allah himself has to say about "Imamah", and whether the Shias are attempting to stretch some Verses beyond their proper meanings with the intention of proving their beliefs.

Category six: "Imams" of the pious

The next Verse to consider where the word "Imam" is used reads:

(وَالَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا هَبْ لَنَا مِنْ أَزْوَاجِنَا وَذُرِّيَّاتِنَا فُرَّةً أَعْيُنَ وَاجْعَلْنَا لِمَتِّقِينَ
إِمَامًا)

And who say: Our Lord! Vouchsafe us comfort of our wives and of our offspring, and make us patterns for (all) those who ward off (evil). (Qur'an 25:74)

This Verse is actually part of a longer sequence where Allah says:

(وَعِبَادُ الرَّحْمَنِ الَّذِينَ يَمْشُونَ عَلَى الْأَرْضِ هَوْنًا وَإِذَا خَاطَبَهُمُ الْجَاهِلُونَ قَالُوا سَلَامًا . وَالَّذِينَ يَبِيئُونَ لِرَبِّهِمْ سُجَّدًا وَقِيَامًا . وَالَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا اصْرِفْ عَنَّا

عَذَابَ جَهَنَّمَ إِنَّ عَذَابَهَا كَانَ غَرَامًا . إِنَّهَا سَاعَتْ مُسْتَغَرًّا وَمُقَامًا . وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا أَنفَقُوا لَمْ يُسْرِفُوا وَلَمْ يَقْتُرُوا وَكَانَ بَيْنَ ذَلِكَ قَوَامًا . وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَدْعُونَ مَعَ اللَّهِ إِلَهًا آخَرَ وَلَا يَقْتُلُونَ النَّفْسَ الَّتِي حَرَّمَ اللَّهُ إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ وَلَا يَزْنُونَ وَمَنْ يَفْعَلْ ذَلِكَ يَلْقَ أَثَامًا . يُضَاعَفْ لَهُ الْعَذَابُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ وَيَخْلُدْ فِيهِ مُهَانًا . إِلَّا مَنْ تَابَ وَآمَنَ وَعَمِلَ عَمَلًا صَالِحًا فَأُولَئِكَ يُبَدِّلُ اللَّهُ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ حَسَنَاتٍ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا . وَمَنْ تَابَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَإِنَّهُ يَتُوبُ إِلَى اللَّهِ مَتَابًا . وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَشْهَدُونَ الزُّورَ وَإِذَا مَرُّوا بِاللُّغُومِ مَرُّوا كِرَامًا . وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا دُكِّرُوا بِآيَاتِ رَبِّهِمْ لَمْ يَخِرُّوا عَلَيْهَا صُمًّا وَعُمْيَانًا . وَالَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا هَبْ لَنَا مِنْ أَزْوَاجِنَا وَدُرِّيَّاتِنَا فُرَّةً أَعْيُنَ وَاجْعَلْنَا لِلْمُتَّقِينَ إِمَامًا . أُولَئِكَ يُجْزَوْنَ الْغُرْفَةَ بِمَا صَبَرُوا وَيُلَقَّوْنَ فِيهَا تَحِيَّةً وَسَلَامًا . خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا حَسُنَتْ مُسْتَقَرًّا وَمُقَامًا . قُلْ مَا يَعْبَأُ بِكُمْ رَبِّي لَوْلَا دُعَاؤُكُمْ فَقَدْ كَذَّبْتُمْ فَسَوْفَ يَكُونُ لِزَامًا)

The (faithful) slaves of the Beneficent are they who walk upon the earth modestly, and when the foolish ones address them answer: Peace; And who spend the night before their Lord, prostrate and standing, And who say: Our Lord! Avert from us the doom of hell; lo! the doom thereof is anguish; Lo! it is wretched as abode and station; And those who, when they spend, are neither prodigal nor grudging; and there is ever a firm station between the two; And those who cry not unto any other god along with Allah, nor take the life which Allah hath forbidden save in (course of) justice, nor commit adultery - and whoso doeth this shall pay the penalty; The doom will be doubled for him on the Day of Resurrection, and he will abide therein disdained for ever; Save him who repenteth and believeth and doth righteous work; as for such, Allah will change their evil deeds to good deeds. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful. And whosoever repenteth and doeth good, he verily repenteth toward Allah with true repentance - And those who will not witness vanity, but when they pass near senseless play, pass by with dignity. And those who, when they are reminded of the revelations of their Lord, fall not deaf and blind thereat. And who say: Our Lord! Vouchsafe us comfort of our wives and of our offspring, and make us patterns for (all) those who ward off (evil). They will be awarded the high place forasmuch as they were steadfast, and they will meet therein with welcome and the ward of peace, Abiding there for ever. Happy is it as abode and station! Say (O Muhammad, unto the disbelievers): My Lord would not concern Himself with you but for your prayer. But now ye have denied (the Truth), therefore there will be judgment. (Qur'an 25:63-77)

Thus, this Ayah is a Dua' or supplication to Allah for the worshiper to be made an Imam for the pious, in addition to being granted happiness through his wives and offspring. The context of this Verse is important to take into consideration when looking into the Sunni and Shia commentaries regarding this passage.

Sunni commentaries of Ayah 25:74

The Sunni commentaries all take the position that the normal Muslim may recite such words, as they are part of the larger qualities of believers mentioned in the passage. For example, Ibn Kathir and at-Tabari in their Tafseers include a narration from Miqdad ibn Al-Aswad (Radhiya Allahu Anhu) where he says that in the early days of Islam, some people would embrace Islam while their close relatives were still polytheists. Such were not the "comfort" for the new Muslims, since they knew their loved ones were destined for punishment.[69] Thus, the first portion of this Ayah was revealed as a source of hope for such people. Other opinions also point to the fact that this portion of the Verse is for Muslims who wish to have pious wives and offspring.

Naturally, the phrase (وَاجْعَلْنَا لِلْمُتَّقِينَ إِمَامًا) is a continuation of this supplication, and the Sunni commentaries have considered this when determining who are the “Imams” being referred to in this Ayah. Therefore, these commentaries point out that the Muslims as a whole are the ones entitled to supplicate by means of these words. There is some discussion of grammatical aspects of this Verse in all the major Tafseers, yet the general application of this Ayah is maintained throughout these commentaries.

I could relate to this view from personal experience. I remember on a number of occasions hearing this supplication being made in the masjids, whether as part of the Qunut in prayer or as part of the Duas in the Friday sermons. I suppose many Muslims can also testify to this. All this shows that the message in this Ayah is not viewed as an indication of any special rank among the Sunni scholars, but rather as a supplication that can be recited by any pious Muslim hoping to improve his condition and become a model for others.

Shia commentaries of Ayah 25:74

The Shia interpretations are tilted towards trying to show that the person or persons praying this specific Dua are only the Imams of the Shia faith. For example, Mahdi Puya’s commentary in this respect says: “In these verses those righteous persons have been described who have earned the right to pray to Allah to appoint them as Imams to guide the pious.”[70]

Meanwhile, the al-Safi commentary presents a narrative that puts Ali as the sole person who ever made this supplication, with the “wives” representing Fatimah, the “offspring” representing Hasan and Hussain, and the “Imam” being himself.[71]

Even though the interpretations provided above are of interest, yet when closely examined we see that they cannot correspond to the Shia belief in Imamah for a number of reasons.

First Issue: Can Infallible Imams recite this Dua?

As has been noted before about the Shia faith, Allah grants the position of Imamah to the deserving people without any outside interference. Moreover, the Imams by virtue of their Infallible status, know that they will be appointed Imams one day, specifically when the previous Imam passes away.[72]

In view of this belief, it is unreasonable to expect the “Imams” to pray in order for them to be “made Imams”, specially when prayers and supplications have nothing to do with Allah appointing an Imam. Additionally, keeping in mind the perfect qualities an Imam possesses in Shia doctrine, this is basically a prayer for a person to be granted perfection and infallibility. In Shiaism, this is a position which a normal Muslim worshipper cannot ask for, and which is redundant for an already infallible and perfect person to request.

Taking the story of Ali “praying for Imamah” in a little more detail, it is seen from the narration provided by Kashani in his Tafseer al-Safi that Ali first saw that his sons were the comfort of his eyes and truly obedient to Allah before he prayed for Allah to make him an Imam for the pious. This again is incompatible with Shia doctrine, since (according to Shia ideology) Ali knew from his birth that he was destined to become the Imam of the Muslim nation after Prophet Muhammad’s (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) death.

Second Issue: What qualities do the people in this Verse possess?

In the beginning of the discussion about this Verse, it was observed that the passage is a continuation of a longer description about the “Slaves of ar-Rahman”. It is proper to list all the qualities that these slaves of Allah have before commenting about the generality of the supplication. Thus, the “Slaves of ar-Rahman” alluded to in this Verse:

1. Walk modestly upon the earth
2. When the foolish ones address them they answer: Peace
3. Spend the night prostrating and standing before their Lord
4. Say: Avert from us the doom of Hell lo! the doom thereof is anguish; Lo! it is wretched as abode and station
5. When they spend, are neither prodigal nor grudging
6. Cry not unto any other god along with Allah
7. Do not take the life which Allah hath forbidden save in (course of) justice
8. Do not commit adultery
9. Will not witness vanity, but when they pass near senseless play, pass by with dignity
10. When they are reminded of the revelations of their Lord, fall not deaf and blind thereat.

Undoubtedly, all the qualities mentioned above are praiseworthy. Nonetheless, none of them, separately or in combination, entails Infallibility or Perfection. Indeed, there could be a very pious person fulfilling all these characteristics without having divine protection in order to attain all the traits mentioned above. Likewise, the pious person will remain fallible even if he achieves all these requirements, and the supplication itself will not elevate him to the status of “Infallible Imamah”.

To conclude the discussion with respect to this Verse, the purpose of these Verses (starting from Ayah 63) is not to exalt a special infallible class of beings. Rather, the purpose is to open the door to all Muslims, in order for them to perform good deeds, leave behind their evil practices, and submit to their Lord. Thus, the mention of “being made Imams” can only mean Imams in the sense of general models and leaders, not of “Divinely appointed Infallible Imams”.

Category seven: Day of Judgement and “Imams”

In Surah Al-Isra (Chapter 17), Allah speaks of the Day of Judgment, saying:

(يَوْمَ نَدْعُو كُلَّ أَنَسٍ بِإِمَامِهِمْ فَمَنْ أُوْتِيَ كِتَابَهُ بِيَمِينِهِ فَأُولَئِكَ يَقْرَءُونَ كِتَابَهُمْ
وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ فَتِيلًا)

On the day when We shall summon all men with their record, whoso is given his book in his right hand - such will read their book and they will not be wronged a shred. (Qur'an 17:71)

The point of discussion in this case centers on whether the Imams being alluded to in here are the “Infallible Imams” as held in the Shia belief. Indeed, many Shias take this Verse to mean that people will be called by the “Imam of their time”, and I personally have seen this Ayah being used to this effect by some Shias in my discussions with them. However, a view of Sunni and Shia commentaries shows that using this Verse as a proof for Imamah has its share of problems.

Sunni commentaries of Ayah 17:71

The Sunni commentaries say that there is a difference of opinion among the scholars as to whom the “Imams” are in this Verse. The first opinion is that people will be called by their book of records. This is the first view proposed in al-Qurtubi's Tafseer, where he quotes a Hadeeth from the Prophet (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) in this respect, the hadeeth reading:

“One of you will be called and will be given his Book in his right hand. He will be in a good physical state, with a white face, and there will be placed on his head a crown of shining pearls. He will go to his companions and they will see him from afar, and will say, "O Allah, let him come to us and bless us with this." Then he will come to them and will say to them, Rejoice, for every man among you will be like this." As for the disbeliever, his face will be black and his body will be enlarged. His companions will see him from afar and will say, "We seek refuge in Allah from this, or from the evil of this, O Allah, do not let him come to us." "Then he will come to them and they will say, O Allah, humiliate him!" He will say, "May Allah cast you away, every man among you will be like this.”.[73]

This view is also found in the Ibn Kathir commentary, and the at-Tabari Tafseer contains this view as well, with Ibn Kathir quoting the same narration presented by al-Qurtubi.[74]

This view is in line with another Ayah in the Qur'an, where it is stated that every nation will be called by its “record”, and in this case the word “Kitaab” is specifically used:

(وَتَرَى كُلَّ أُمَّةٍ جَائِيَةٍ كُلُّ أُمَّةٍ تُدْعَى إِلَى كِتَابِهَا الْيَوْمَ تُجْزَوْنَ مَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ)

And thou wilt see each nation crouching, each nation summoned to its record. (And it will be said unto them): This day ye are requited what ye used to do. (Qur'an 45:28)

Al-Qurtubi points out that the phrase: (فَمَنْ أُوتِيَ كِتَابَهُ بِيَمِينِهِ) that comes immediately after the word “Imamihim” in effect strengthens the position of those who maintain that the “Imam” in this Verse refers to the book of deeds. In addition, the use of the word “Imam” in Verse 36:12 to refer to the Preserved Tablet further solidifies the arguments by this group. Ibn Kathir also favoured this view as being the strongest.

Other scholars have taken the view that the “Imam” in here refers to the Revelation that was sent to each people, or to the religion that was given to them, as Allah says:

(لِكُلِّ جَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ شِرْعَةً وَمِنْهَاجًا)

For each We have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. (Qur'an 5:48)

In addition to these possibilities, other interpretations place the word “Imam” on par with a human leader, with the leaders being the Prophets sent to every nation. This is the explanation provided by Mujaahid (as quoted in Ibn Kathir's Tafseer regarding this Ayah). Tafseer at-Tabari also provides this view as his first commentary on this Verse, quoting several Ahadeeths in this respect. Others say that the “Imam” by which people will be called depends on the leaders the individual followed in this life, so that the followers of the Prophets will be called by the Prophets, while the followers of evil leaders or of Shaytan will likewise be called by their respective leaders. In all these cases, what is important to note is that none of the major Sunni commentaries took the meaning of “Imam” as being a special rank, or that all people will be called by one “Infallible Imam”.

Shia commentaries of Ayah 17:71

Considering the passionate zeal with which many Shias advance Ayah 17:71 as referring exclusively to the “Infallible Imams”, it is interesting to note that none of the major Shia commentaries took this to be the only possible interpretation.

Indeed, some of the Shia commentaries listed some of the same views expressed by the Sunni commentators without criticizing such positions. For example, in the at-Tibbyan Tafseer by at-Tusi, it is

explicitly mentioned that the scholars have differed on the meaning of “Imam” in this Verse. At-Tusi goes on to say that some took it as meaning the Prophet the people followed, others as the book of records, the Book that was revealed unto the nation, the deities they worshipped, or the people they took as their leaders.[75] The Majma-ul-Bayan tafseer also gives the same possibilities, and adds that Imam may also mean “their mothers”. [76]

What is more interesting is that even those Shia commentaries, which took “good Imam” to mean “Infallible Imam”, made the distinction between a “rightful” Imam by which the good servants of Allah will be called, and the evil Leaders by which the sinners will be called. This can be seen from commentaries such as al-Mizan, where Allamah Tabatabai tries hard to show that the “Imam” can only mean a human leader. Nonetheless, even he accepts that everyone will not be called by the “Infallible Imam”, and that the evil people will be called by their own leaders.[77]

It can be seen that there is no consensus among the Shia tafseers as to the term “Imam” signifying Infallibles only, or that this is the only meaning that can be given to the word “Imam”. Yet, there a number of aspects to discuss due to some of the statements we find from the Shia side.

First Issue: Is “Good” equal to “Infallible and Divinely Appointed”?

It is perhaps expected that the Shia commentaries that interpret “Imam” not as a book but as a human would take the “good Imams” this Verse indirectly alludes to as being the “Infallible Imams” of the Shia faith. There is a logical error in this line of argument. The truth is that we would need to enter the fold of Shiaism first before accepting that “Good” means only “Infallible and Divinely Appointed Imams”. There is nothing in the wording of the Ayah to suggest this implication, and it would be very difficult for the neutral reader to derive this meaning from the Verse.

Rather, the Shia commentators who have stuck to this meaning have worked in the opposite direction, inserting their beliefs into the Ayah instead of letting the Ayah dictate their beliefs. As a result, such commentators have rejected the positions that were tolerated by earlier Shia tafseers, which had accepted other interpretations of the word “Imam” as possibly correct.

Second Topic: Imam for a nation, not for every time

Some Shia scholars have taken the above usage of the word “Imam” to mean that every time has an Infallible Imam, as is stated in standard Shia ideology. Nonetheless, this also seems to be somewhat different from the message of the Ayah. The Verse is stating a correspondence between every nation and its “Imam”. From Ayah 45:28 it is known that there is a correspondence between every nation and its Book of records, and from other Qur’anic Verses the association between every nation and the Messenger that was sent to them is established. Moreover, there is a correspondence between every nation and the rites that were revealed to them, as evidenced in Verses 5:48, 22:34, and 22:67. In all these cases, the ties are between a nation or town and its Prophet, its rites, or its book of records.

However, the Shia belief in this respect ties the “Imam” to a time, not to a people or town. If the Ayah were intended to agree with Shia beliefs, it would have been revealed to strengthen this line of reasoning, instead of stating the connection between an “Imam” and a nation (this topic will be further explained later on, as there are more evidences that lead the researcher to believe that this notion is altogether flawed).

Considering all the aspects stated above, it is difficult to establish that Ayah 17:71 relates to the “Infallible Imams” as understood in the Shia faith. This is the result of looking into the interpretations made by Sunni and Shia scholars alike as to the meaning of Imam in the context of this verse, where it is noted that there is no consensus as to the meaning of this word, neither from the Sunni nor from the Shia side. Moreover, we

see that there is a manipulation from the Shias in reaching the conclusion that “Good” means “Infallible” since the Shia belief is injected into the Ayah. Finally, the wording of the Verse does not actually refer to a correspondence between an “Imam” and a period of time, but rather between an “Imam” and a nation.

Category eight: Ishaq (Alayhi Salaam) and Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) as “Imams”

Specific Prophets have been mentioned as “Imams” in two Verses. These first of these Ayahs is:

(وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُ إِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ نَافِلَةً وَكُلًّا جَعَلْنَا صَالِحِينَ . وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أئِمَّةً يَهْدُونَ
بَأْمُرِنَا وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْهِمْ فِعْلَ الْخَيْرَاتِ وَإِقَامَ الصَّلَاةِ وَإِيتَاءَ الزَّكَاةِ وَكَانُوا لَنَا عَابِدِينَ
(

And We bestowed upon him Isaac, and Jacob as a grandson. Each of them We made righteous. And We made them chiefs who guide by Our command, and We inspired in them the doing of good deeds and the right establishment of worship and the giving of alms, and they were worshippers of Us (alone). (Qur'an 21:72-73)

In this passage, Prophets Ishaq (Alayhi Salaam) and Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) are mentioned as “Imams” who guided by the Command of their Lord. Reading the previous Verses, Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) may also be included in this list (his specific case will be considered later). An examination of both Sunni and Shia interpretations and a survey of other related Ayahs will clarify whether the belief in Imamah can be deduced from these Verses.

As has been the case throughout this chapter, there will be a need to suppose that the overall rules given for Imams by Shia scholars are to be applied to these two Prophets, since there is no specific mention of any different rules for Ishaq (Alayhi Salaam) and Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam). In addition, assuming different rules would mean that they are “Imams” in a sense different than the one Shias would like to advance, and the entire discussion would be pointless.

Sunni interpretations of Ayah 21:73

The Sunni interpretations take this Ayah to signify that Ishaq (Alayhi Salaam) and Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) were leaders in a general sense, inviting people to good deeds, to worship Allah and to obey their Lord. This is the view of at-Tabari in his Tafseer, as well as that of Ibn Kathir.[78] Al-Qurtubi's commentary mentions some additional points, such as that these Prophets called towards the Oneness of Allah, and that the “guidance by Our command” this Verse alludes to the inspiration they received in terms of orders and prohibitions.[79] In all these cases, the nature of their “Imamah” is no different from the nature of their Prophethood.

Shia interpretations of Ayah 21:73

Many of the Shia interpretations give this Verse a meaning similar to the one given by Sunni commentators. For example, Allamah al-Kashani in Tafseer al-Safi quotes a narration through which it says that Ishaq (Alayhi Salaam) and Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) put the Commands of Allah over their own Commands and the Ruling of Allah over their own rulings in guiding the people, contrary to the case of Firaun who put his own Commands and rulings above those of Allah.[80] Allamah at-Tabbarsi in the Majma-ul-Bayan commentary makes the argument that they guided the people to the correct path through their actions and sayings.[81] The at-Tibbayan interpretation makes the similar comment that they guided through their deeds to the correct path.[82]

In the Tafseer al-Mizan, a fervent effort is being made in trying to prove that the “Imams” Ishaq (Alayhi Salaam) and Yaqoob (Alayhi Salaam) are being mentioned as are “Infallible Divinely Appointed Imams”.[83] It can be seen that Allamah Tabatabai says that guidance through a Commandment constitutes Imamah, and he ties it to Ayah 2:124 where the “Imamate” of Ibrahim is declared. It is also worth to mention that Allamah Tabatabai declares that Nubuawah and Imamah are different functions and Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) became an Imam only after he had been made a Prophet (implying that in his view Imamah is higher than Prophethood). Tabatabai goes on to mention a few of the functions of Imamah in terms of preserving the religion and being the ultimate perfect guide for humanity between them and their Lord. However, he does not give any further specific evidences as to how Ishaq (Alayhi Salaam) and Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) performed their duties as Imams.[84] To make judgment concerning the true nature of their “Imamah”, the specific instances in the Qur’an where these Prophets are mentioned is the only tool available to the researcher.

Looking into Yaqub’s Imamah from the Qur’an

There are not many narrative stories in the Qur’an from which we can determine the nature of Ishaq’s (Alayhi Salaam) Imamah. In the case of Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam), the stories that can be gathered are from Surah Yusuf, since Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) was Yusuf’s (Alayhi Salaam) father. There is at least one instance in the Surah that clashes with what Shiaism teaches us about Imamah.

The issue of Yaqoob (Alayhi Salaam) and his son Yusuf (Alayhi Salaam): Sajdah to Yusuf

The proof against Imamah from the story of Yaqoob (Alayhi Salaam) and Yusuf (Alayhi Salaam) comes from the incident at the end of the narrative, where Yusuf’s father, aunt, and brothers visit him as the Ruler of Egypt. Allah states in the Qur’an:

(وَرَفَعَ أَبَوَيْهِ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ وَخَرُّوا لَهُ سُجَّدًا وَقَالَ يَا أَبَتِ هَذَا تَأْوِيلُ رُؤْيَايَ مِنْ قَبْلُ قَدْ جَعَلَهَا رَبِّي حَقًّا وَقَدْ أَحْسَنَ بِي إِذْ أَخْرَجَنِي مِنَ السِّجْنِ وَجَاءَ بِكُمْ مِّنَ الْبَدْوِ مِنْ بَعْدِ أَنْ تَزَغَ الشَّيْطَانُ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَ إِخْوَتِي إِنَّ رَبِّي لَطِيفٌ لِّمَا يَشَاءُ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ)

And he placed his parents on the dais and they fell down before him prostrate, and he said: O my father! This is the interpretation of my dream of old. My Lord hath made it true, and He hath shown me kindness, since He took me out of the prison and hath brought you from the desert after Satan had made strife between me and my brethren. Lo! my Lord is tender unto whom He will. He is the Knower, the Wise. (Qur’an 12:100)

Most of the commentaries, from both the Sunni and the Shia sides, would indicate that Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam), his aunt and brothers all did prostration to Yusuf (this would be in appreciation to Allah). For example, Ayatullah Mahdi Puya’s commentary says:

The father, the brothers and the aunt fell down in prostration before Yusuf. There are two types of sajdahs- one is that which is for Allah in total submission to His will, and the other is done in reverence to pay homage to a divinely chosen representative of Allah.[85]

There are other interpretations and translations that say all (including Yusuf (Alayhi Salaam)) did prostration to Allah as a sign of thanks to Him. For the purposes of this discussion, this will only have a scant difference, since it is accepted that Yusuf (Alayhi Salaam) was the Ruler of Egypt in both cases.

The relationship between Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) and Yusuf (Alayhi Salaam) as to who was the “rightful Imam” comes into play in this case[86]. There are only two alternatives that can be considered:

Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) as the Imam throughout: One of the possibilities is that Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) was the “Infallible Imam” throughout his life (i.e. after the death of Ishaq (Alayhi Salaam)), including the time when he travelled to Egypt under the rule of his son Yusuf (Alayhi Salaam).

If this is indeed the case, it would seem puzzling as to why Yusuf (Alayhi Salaam) did not leave his post as King and hand it over to his father Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) who, according to the rules of Shiaism, would be the most able to carry out such duties. Instead, Yusuf (Alayhi Salaam) is seen giving thanks to Allah and saying:

(رَبِّ قَدْ أَنْيَّتَنِي مِنَ الْمُلْكِ وَعَلَّمْتَنِي مِنْ تَأْوِيلِ الْأَحَادِيثِ فَاطِرَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ أَنْتَ وَلِيِّي فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ تَوَفَّنِي مُسْلِمًا وَأَلْحِقْنِي بِالصَّالِحِينَ)

O my Lord! Thou hast given me (something) of sovereignty and hast taught me (something) of the interpretation of events - Creator of the heavens and the earth! Thou art my Protecting Guardian in the world and the Hereafter. Make me to die muslim (unto Thee), and join me to the righteous. (Qur'an 12:101)

In the situation presented above, Yusuf (Alayhi Salaam) would not be the Imam of his era, yet as a Divine Prophet of Allah he should have been aware of the rules of Imamah and how they would affect the sovereignty on the land. Yet we see him holding on to the Kingdom and not offering his position to his father Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam).

Yusuf (Alayhi Salaam) as Imam at some stage, replacing Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam): This is the only other possibility the Shia faith would provide, considering that Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) accepted the higher status of Yusuf (Alayhi Salaam) during his visit to Egypt.

It should be kept in mind though, that the Shia doctrine in this regard directs to the conclusion that the “official” Imam remains an Imam as long as he is alive. This is the reason why, according to the Shia understanding, Ali (Radhia Allahu Anhu) was the “official” Imam even though his sons Hasan (Radhia Allahu Anhu) and Hussain (Radhia Allahu Anhu) were also alive and fully Infallible throughout Ali’s “Imamah”. This is also why Hussain (Radhia Allahu Anhu) assumed the formal Imamah only after his brother Hasan (Radhia Allahu Anhu) had died. Likewise, there is no indication of any Imam “abdicating” his post in order for another Infallible to take over.

To clarify this point, Yusuf (Alayhi Salaam) was obviously lower in knowledge than his father during his early years, as is evidenced when he informs his father Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) of his dream:

(إِذْ قَالَ يُوسُفُ لِأَبِيهِ يَا أَبَتِ إِنِّي رَأَيْتُ أَحَدَ عَشَرَ كَوْكَبًا وَالشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ رَأَيْتُهُمْ لِي سَاجِدِينَ . قَالَ يَا بُنَيَّ لَا تَقْصُصْ رُؤْيَاكَ عَلَى إِخْوَتِكَ فَيَكِيدُوا لَكَ كَيْدًا إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ لِلْإِنْسَانِ عَدُوٌّ مُبِينٌ . وَكَذَلِكَ يَجْتَبِيكَ رَبُّكَ وَيُعَلِّمُكَ مِنْ تَأْوِيلِ الْأَحَادِيثِ وَيُتِمُّ نِعْمَتَهُ عَلَيْكَ وَعَلَى آلِ يَعْقُوبَ كَمَا أَتَمَّهَا عَلَى أَبَوَيْكَ مِنْ قَبْلُ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْحَاقَ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ)

When Joseph said unto his father: O my father! Lo! I saw in a dream eleven planets and the sun and the moon, I saw them prostrating themselves unto me. He said: O my dear son! Tell not thy brethren of thy vision, lest they plot a plot against thee. Lo! Satan is for man an open foe. Thus thy Lord will prefer thee

and will teach thee the interpretation of events, and will perfect His grace upon thee and upon the family of Jacob as He perfected it upon thy forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Lo! thy Lord is Knower, Wise. (Qur'an 12:4-6)

While it can be perceived later that Yusuf (Alayhi Salaam) did indeed gain knowledge and wisdom as declared specifically by Allah, this would still leave the fact that he could not really overtake his father in wisdom and divine favours, as an application of the rules of Imamah. The first possibility is the only other alternative, which has its own set of inconsistencies as noted above.

Is inspiration equal to Imamah?

The original Verse under discussion in this section states that Ishaq and Yaqub were “inspired” in the doing of good deeds, the establishment of prayer and the giving of alms. All these inspirations and deeds are indeed very good and commendable, but there is really no distinction between this and the task of a Prophet. This is exactly the reason why no Sunni commentary sees anything strange in calling these two Prophets as “Imams”.

Taking all these evidences into account, it is obvious that saying Ishaq (Alayhi Salaam) and Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) were “Infallible Imams” has serious problems when compared to other Qur’anic passages and with the basics of Shia faith. Therefore, there is no alternative but to say that the “Imamah” in this case refers to a position altogether different than the one understood by Shias.

Category nine: “Imam for mankind”... Ibrahim and Imamah

Perhaps the most oft repeated of Verses by Shias with respect to Imamah that actually contains the word “Imam” is Ayah 2:124. The Ayah reads:

(وَإِذِ ابْتَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ رَبُّهُ بِكَلِمَاتٍ فَأَتَمَّهُنَّ قَالَ إِنِّي جَاعِلُكَ لِلنَّاسِ إِمَامًا قَالَ وَمِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِي قَالَ لَا يَنَالُ عَهْدِي الظَّالِمِينَ)

And (remember) when his Lord tried Abraham with (His) commands, and he fulfilled them, He said: Lo! I have appointed thee a leader for mankind. (Abraham) said: And of my offspring (will there be leaders)? He said: My covenant includeth not wrong-doers. (Qur'an 2:124)

Indeed, the logical basis for including Prophets such as Ishaq (Alayhi Salaam) and Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) as “Imams” rests on the interpretation given to this Verse, since Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) is the ancestor of these two Prophets. Likewise, this Verse has been used as the springboard by a number of Shia scholars to explain the doctrine of Imamah in all its aspects.

As I looked into the Shia interpretations of this Verse, I noticed an ambitious effort being put by the Shia commentaries in trying to show that Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) was an “Imam” in the sense understood by Shias. This is perhaps the only Ayah where the word “Imam” is interpreted by all Shia tafseers as meaning “Infallible and Divinely Appointed Imam”. However, in their attempts to show that Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) was appointed as an “Imam”, the Shias have resorted to certain narrations and interpretations that lack consistency, or raise more questions than they answer. Even so, the first order of work is to look into the Sunni commentaries before looking into the Shia interpretations.

Sunni interpretations of Ayah 2:124

The Sunni commentaries for this Ayah mostly elucidate what were the words upon which Ibrahim was tried, what type of “Imam” Ibrahim became, and who are the “Thaalims” that are excluded from his prayer.

With respect to the “Test/Commands” upon which Ibrahim was tried, all the commentaries, when considered together, show that there are a number of possibilities regarding what this test consisted of. The at-Tabari Tafseer includes these opinions, by noting that some say the “Command” was the Law of Islam, while others say it is ten of the Sunnahs of Islam in terms of hygiene and cleanliness. Others say the test composed of going through the period of arguing with his people over the stars, moon, and the sun being false deities, being thrown into the fire but being saved, going on Hijrah, circumcising himself to fulfil Allah’s commandment, and being patient throughout all these trials. Many additional options are considered, but at-Tabari himself says that it is most likely a combination of all these, since Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) did indeed go through a great deal of patience and perseverance in the religion of Allah.[87] The other commentaries also broadly discuss these same possibilities with respect to the “Command” which Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) fulfilled.[88] For the purposes of this work, it is not necessary to comb through the merits and faults of each option.

Next, the meaning of “Imam” is considered in this context. The Sunni commentaries have taken the word to mean leadership and guidance, without any further religious meaning. For example, it is taken to mean “Prophethood” by some. Ibn Kathir says that Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) was made an Imam and leader in the aspect of Tawhid. Ibn Kathir further gives evidence from the Qur’an (Ayahs 3:67-68, 6:161-162, and 16:120-123) that Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) is a leader and Imam even for this Ummah.[89]

Moreover, other opinions suggest that Ibrahim was made an “Imam” because of him being the first in many characteristics (such as being the first to be circumcised, the first to be shown the rites of Hajj) so due to this he will be followed by all who come after him. Also connected to this is the opinion that Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) was to be followed in the rites of Hajj by all succeeding nations.

Once it is known that the term “Imam” is not tied to a strict religious term in the Sunni view, it is reasonable that the word “Thaalim” will be interpreted in its apparent meaning as wrongdoer. Thus, “Thaalim” is equated with actions such as worshipping idols and disobeying Allah. Also, it is stated in the al-Qurtubi Tafseer that the covenant which Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) undertook could not be taken by “Thaalims”, since their nature is such that they would break the oaths and pledges they promise to keep.[90]

From the Sunni side then, it is seen that Ayah 2:124 has not been interpreted as signifying any specific type of Imamah for Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam), other than the general example he set for future generations and the Muslim community.

Shia interpretations of Ayah 2:124

The Shia interpretations take a different approach as to what “Imam” means in this case, as they take Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) as having been chosen to the rank of “Divinely Appointed Imamah” as understood in the Shia faith. Indeed, a great number of Shia scholars state that this is the meaning of “Imam” in this Verse. For example, Allamah Al kashifu'l Ghita writes when explaining about the infallibility of the Imam:

Like all Prophets, the Imams are also infallible; there is no possibility of their committing any sin. The infallibility of the Imam is clearly proved from what God Almighty says in the Holy Qur’an: "Verily, I make you an Imam for mankind. He (Abraham) said: "And of my offspring?" He said: "My covenant does not reach to the unjust." [91]

In the same fashion, Allamah Tabatabai in his Tafseer al-Mizan quotes the following narration under the discussion of this Verse:

"Ibrahim was a prophet, and he was not an Imam until Allah, Blessed and High is He, said (to him): "Surely I am going to make you an Imam for men" (Ibrahim) said: "And of my offspring?" Then Allah,

Blessed and High is He, said: "My covenant will not include the unjust" Whoever had (ever) worshipped an idol or a sculpture or an image, cannot be an Imam"[92]

In addition to this, Allamah Tabatabai used Ayah 2:124 to explain what Imamah means in general terms, listing the different qualifications an "Infallible Imam" is required to possess (this list was included in the introduction to this work). Also, Allamah al-Kashani in Tafseer al-Safi, Ayatullah Makarem Shirazi in his commentary, and the Mahdi Puya/Mir Ali commentary all take the same position, that Ibrahim was appointed to the rank of "Imam" in a religious sense.[93]

Because of this idea, the phrase "My covenant includeth not wrong-doers." is taken to mean that only Infallibles can occupy the post of Imamah, with the word "Thaalim" signifying any person who has committed a sin at any point during his life.

Given the narrations and interpretations I discovered while reading the different Shia commentaries and works discussing this Verse, I will go through the meaning of the term "Thaalim" first, before moving on to the "Imamah" of Ibrahim.

Is a Non-Thalim to be automatically considered an Infallible?

The first point to tackle concerns whether a person who is not a wrong-doer (i.e. is not a "Thalim") is to be considered Infallible. This is the natural consequence of the phrase

(قَالَ لَا يَنَالُ عَهْدِي الظَّالِمِينَ)

He said: My covenant includeth not wrong-doers.

found in this Ayah. One of the scholarly Shia answers given to this issue is as follows, stated in Allamah Tabatabai's al-Mizan commentary:

One of our teachers (may Allah have mercy on him!) was asked as to how this verse could prove that the Imam must be ma'sum. He replied:

Logically, we may divide mankind into four groups: (1) One who remains unjust throughout his life; (2) One who was never unjust in any period of his life; (3) One who was unjust in the beginning, but became just later on; and (4) One who was just in the beginning, but became unjust afterwards, Ibrahim was too sublime in position to ask for the Imamah for the first or the fourth group. This leaves two groups (the second and the third), which could be included in his prayer. And Allah rejected one of them - the one who was unjust in the beginning but became just later on. Now, there remains only one group who could be given the Imamah - the one who was never unjust in any period of his life; that is, who was ma'sum.[94]

Reading the explanation given above, one can notice the circular reasoning applied by the "Shia teacher". Such an explanation is common among the Shia explaining this Verse and trying to justify Imamah with it. Notwithstanding, there are some questions to be asked in this respect, the first one of them being:

Is it appropriate to equate "Just" with "Infallible" (Ma'asom)?

The logic behind saying that the group to be given Imamah is "Infallible" (Ma'asom) is by equating it with those who are "Just". In the original Arabic, the word used by the Shia teacher for "Just" is "Ghayr Thaalin". The Shia scholar arbitrarily says that Imamah can only be for those who were just throughout all their lives. However, certain other cases when a person can lead a nation without having to be Infallible throughout his life, without compromising the essence of good leadership can also be identified.[95]

The last paragraph above is an exercise in reasoning that will only have limited impact on the conclusions that may be reached. Perhaps it is more important to ask:

Who is a just person?

The immediate word that would come to our minds when thinking of the opposite of “unjust” is “just”. It is not “perfect” or “Infallible”. This is obvious, and does not need much elucidation. Thus, the qualities of a just person in general is what the reader should strive to look for. The answer is found from the answers given by the office of Grand Ayatullah Ali al-Sistani:

Question: Who is a just person?

Answer: A person is said to be just when he performs all those acts which are obligatory upon him, and refrains from all those things which are forbidden to him. And the sign of being just is that one is apparently of a good character, so that if enquiries are made about him from the people of his locality, or from his neighbours, or from those persons with whom he lives, they would confirm his good conduct.[96]

It is seen from the Ayatullah’s answer that under normal circumstances the definition of “just” is not at all connected with divine protection from sin, but rather concerns the overall good conduct and piety of a person. It struck me as strange as to how this can suddenly change for one Verse of the Qur’an, without any unbiased reason provided from the Shia side.

Additionally, as was seen above, in some narrations and commentaries provided even by Shias, the meaning of “Thaalim” is equated with a person who worshipped idols or images. It can be perceived that idol worship is not the only sin a person can commit, but rather is a major sin that is tantamount to polytheism and Shirk, and such a person is not a Muslim, let alone Infallible. As a result, those who are born into the correct religion will likely never prostrate to an idol or image, yet their status according to Shiaism is not one of “Divine Protection from Error”.

The Qur’anic Viewpoint of “Thaalims”

It is also appropriate to ask: What is the meaning of “Thaalim” as presented in the Qur’an, and does it agree with the idea presented by the Shias?

Allah gives ample proofs of what acts put a person into the category of Thaalis. Taken as a whole, these Verses show that Allah does not consider Thaalis to be people who may have committed a sin or erred at one point in their lives, but rather people who are very much steeped in wrongdoing, polytheism, and other big acts of disobedience to Allah. This is especially the case when he refers to a nation or group of people as Thaalis.

For example, Allah considers those who transgress his commandments knowingly to be Thaalis:

(وَمَنْ يَتَعَدَّ حُدُودَ اللَّهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ)

And whoever transgresses the limits ordained by Allah, then such are the Zalimun (wrong-doers, etc.). (Qur’an 2:229)[97]

In other places, Thaalis are directly equated with polytheists and disbelievers in Allah, such as:

(وَالْكَافِرُونَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ)

And it is the disbelievers who are the Zalimun (wrong-doers, etc.). (Qur'an 2:254)

(وَلَا تَدْعُ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ مَا لَا يَنْفَعُكَ وَلَا يَضُرُّكَ فَإِنْ فَعَلْتَ فَإِنَّكَ إِذَا مِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ)
(

"And invoke not besides Allah, any that will neither profit you, nor hurt you, but if (in case) you did so, you shall certainly be one of the Zalimun (polytheists and wrong-doers)." (Qur'an 10:106)

On a similar note, the evil peoples who disobeyed the Prophets sent to them are termed as "Thaalims":

(وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا نُوحًا إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِ فَلَبِثَ فِيهِمْ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ إِلَّا خَمْسِينَ عَامًا فَأَخَذَهُمُ الطُّوفَانُ وَهُمْ ظَالِمُونَ)

And indeed We sent Nuh (Noah) to his people, and he stayed among them a thousand years less fifty years [inviting them to believe in the Oneness of Allah (Monotheism), and discard the false gods and other deities], and the Deluge overtook them while they were Zalimun (wrong-doers, polytheists, disbelievers, etc.). (Qur'an 29:14)

Additionally, Thaalis are put on par with those who call themselves as gods:

(وَمَنْ يَقُلْ مِنْهُمْ إِنِّي إِلَهٌ مِنْ دُونِهِ فَلَيْسَ بَدْعُكَ كَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي الظَّالِمِينَ)

And if any of them should say: "Verily, I am an ilah (a god) besides Him (Allah)," such a one We should recompense with Hell. Thus We recompense the Zalimun (polytheists and wrong-doers, etc.). (Qur'an 21:29)

Allah also states that His curse is on the Thaalis:

(وَنَادَىٰ أَصْحَابُ الْجَنَّةِ أَصْحَابَ النَّارِ أَنْ قَدْ وَجَدْنَا مَا وَعَدَنَا رَبُّنَا حَقًّا فَهَلْ وَجَدْتُمْ مَا وَعَدَ رَبُّكُمْ حَقًّا قَالُوا نَعَمْ فَأَذَّنَ مُؤَذِّنٌ بَيْنَهُمْ أَنْ لَعْنَةُ اللَّهِ عَلَى الظَّالِمِينَ)
(

And the dwellers of Paradise will call out to the dwellers of the Fire (saying): "We have indeed found true what our Lord had promised us; have you also found true, what your Lord promised (warnings, etc.)?" They shall say: "Yes." Then a crier will proclaim between them: "The Curse of Allah is on the Zalimun (polytheists and wrong-doers, etc.)." (Qur'an 7:44)

Moreover, Shaytan and his followers are portrayed as Thaalis:

(كَمَثَلِ الشَّيْطَانِ إِذْ قَالَ لِلْإِنْسَانِ اكْفُرْ فَلَمَّا كَفَرَ قَالَ إِنِّي بَرِيءٌ مِنْكَ إِنِّي أَخَافُ اللَّهَ رَبَّ الْعَالَمِينَ . فَكَانَ عَاقِبَتُهُمَا أَنَّهُمَا فِي النَّارِ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا وَذَلِكَ جَزَاءُ الظَّالِمِينَ)

(Their allies deceived them) like Shaitan (Satan), when he says to man: "Disbelieve in Allah." But when (man) disbelieves in Allah, Shaitan (Satan) says: "I am free of you, I fear Allah, the Lord of the 'Alamin (mankind, jinns and all that exists)!" So the end of both will be that they will be in the Fire, abiding therein. Such is the recompense of the Zalimun (i.e. polytheists, wrong-doers, disbelievers in Allah and in His Oneness, etc.). (Qur'an 59:16-17)

There are many other similar instances in the Qur'an. It would be difficult for the neutral person to conclude from all these occurrences that "Thaalim" means "fallible". Even the Shia commentaries do not take these other instances of the word "Thaalim" as meaning "capable of committing sins". Therefore, the only conclusion that can be reached about the word "Thaalim" in the Qur'an is that it signifies polytheism, disbelief, and a strong inclination to commit evil actions.

Why so much emphasis on "Non-Thaalims" with "Imams"?

One of the aspects of the Shia view that is strange is the sheer amount of energy put into trying to show that "Thulm" is irreconcilable with Imamah. This is all apparently very good, but we never see such efforts being made in trying to show that "Thulm" does not correspond to Prophethood either.

In Islamic belief, the sinner (or "Thaalim" as the Shia understanding has it) cannot occupy the position of Prophethood either. Nevertheless, the Shia interpretations go to great lengths in trying to show the link between a "Non-Thaalim" and the Infallibility of the Imam, rather than saying that this is a criteria for Prophets and Messengers as well. Considering the high status of Imamah in Shia belief, it would seem that Infallibility is a condition only for Imamah, not for Prophethood.

To illustrate this, the following question may be asked from the Shias:

What happened to the Prophets from Ibrahim's (Alayhi Salaam) progeny (or before him) who did not become Imams? Were they "Thaalims" that they did not achieve this status?

Of course, the Shia will answer the above question in the negative. However, some of the Shia commentaries give us a different message. For example, while discussing Ayah 2:124, Allamah Tabatabai declares that not all Prophets are Imams. He says: "In one place, Allah declares about various prophets that they were rightly guided by Him, and yet does not join it with the statement that they guided their people to the truth." [98] and brings up Ayahs 6:86-90, where a list of Prophets who were guided to the truth is provided, but where no mention is made about them leading their people. Amazingly, the only way the Shia scholars can come up with such a statement is by indirectly implying that some of the Prophets mentioned in these Verses were "Thaalims", because such Shia scholars are saying that the Prophets who were not "Imams" did not guide their people.

For me, it seemed as a very improper way to advance the arguments in favour of Imamah. Therefore, another one of the "proofs" used in favour of Imamah in Shiaism seemed to be shaky and internally inconsistent.

What did Ibrahim do as an "Imam"?

Another topic to look at concerns the actions of Ibrahim after his supposed appointment as an "Imam". Any Muslim versed in the stories of the Prophets knows about the actions of Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) during his lifetime, from his early age, passing through the arguments he had with his townspeople, the trials he went through from all sides, and his building of the Ka'bah.

If the Shia interpretation is to be taken as correct, perhaps the only concrete thing Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) did as an "Imam" was to build the Ka'bah with his son Ismail (Alayhi Salaam). We do not see him calling anyone towards his Imamah after he had been appointed as such. Since he is taken as an "Imam for

mankind” it would be expected for him to travel as far as he could in order to make all mankind recognize him as the Divinely appointed Imam, and yet we do not even see him telling his own sons that he is the “Infallible Imam”. Almost all the stories about Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) are before his presumed appointment, and even the building of the Ka’bah in and of itself is not an action that would warrant Imamah (e.g. Prophet Ismail (Alayhi Salam) was also responsible for the construction of the Ka’bah even though he was not an Imam).

From what I understood, the inconsistencies in this respect are the result of trying to stretch one Verse of the Qur’an to fit all the elaborate concepts Shias have about Imamah. As can be easily seen, the parts simply do not come together.

A troubling narration

The research into what “Imam” refers to for the Shia is obviously filled with a number of narrations. As I was looking through the Shia tafseers, I noticed the following Shia Hadeeth presented with respect to this Verse, supposedly from Imam as-Sadiq:

as Sadiq (a.s.) said: "Verily Allah (to Whom belong Might and Majesty) accepted Ibrahim as a servant before making him a prophet; and verily Allah made him a prophet before appointing him as a messenger; and verily Allah appointed him as a messenger before taking him as a friend; and verily Allah took him as a friend before making him an Imam. When He combined for him all (the above mentioned) things, He said, 'Surely I am going to make you an Imam for men.' " The Imam further said: "It was because of the greatness of it (i.e., Imamah) in the eyes of Ibrahim (a.s.) that he said: 'And of my offspring?' He said: 'My covenant will not include the unjust. "The Imam explained: "A fool will not be Impugn of a pious." [99]

This narration poses a number of problems for the objective researcher. It would show without a doubt that the Shia view on Imamah is that it is indeed higher than the positions of ‘Abd (servant), Nabi (Prophet), Rasool (Messenger), and Khaleel (Friend), and that it is a combination of all these posts. According to this logic, Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) had to pass through all these stages and then (and only then) was he considered suitable for the “test” that would confer Imamah upon him. In fact, Allamah Tabatabai uses this narration to build his argument about what an Imam is in general.

Other scholars also give similar interpretations, such as the Mahdi Puya/Mir Ali commentary that says about Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam):

In spite of his holding the office of the prophethood he was tested and tried by Allah before He made him an Imam. It means that a prophet is not necessarily an Imam and Imamah is an office of a decidedly higher order which is granted only when one proves himself suitable and worthy after undergoing a test.[100]

Moreover, Grand Ayatullah Makarem Shirazi says that Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) became an Imam only after he had passed the stages of Prophethood and Messengership, again implying that Imamah cannot be reached save after reaching these “lower” positions.[101]

Also, in Peshawar Nights the following is mentioned about Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam):

Allah intended to make his rank more exalted. Since prophethood and the title of Khalil (Friend) did not apparently warrant a higher rank, the office of Imamah was the only office of a higher order to which even a Prophet of Allah could be entrusted.[102]

These statements pave the way for even stranger comments to be made in some Shia works. For example, in Peshawar Nights the Shia scholar Shirazi goes on to say about Ali’s (Radhia Allahu Anhu) position:

That Ali attained the rank of prophethood can be proven by the reference to the Hadith of Manzila (Tradition Regarding Ranks), which has been unanimously narrated in more or less the same words. The last of the holy prophets repeated a number of times and in different congregations: "Are you not content that you are to me what Aaron was to Moses, except that there shall be no prophet after me?"[103] (Peshawar Nights, Fourth Session, Part 3)[104]

Similarly, Allamah Majlisi asserts:

"On the whole, after admission of the fact that the Imams are not prophets, we are bound to acknowledge the fact that they are superior to all Prophets and Awsiya (legatees) except our Prophet (salutations and peace upon him and his family). To our knowledge there is no reason not to describe the Imams as Prophets except consideration to the status of the Final Prophet. Our intellect too, cannot perceive of a distinction between Nubuwwah (prophethood) and Imamah."[105]

I was deeply perplexed about these statements. Yes, Sultanu'l-Wa'izin Shirazi gives a synopsis about "different types of Prophethood", in order to show that Shias do not hold Ali (Radhia Allahu Anhu) or the other "Imams" to be higher than Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). However, he does not try to roll back the statement about "Ali attained the rank of Prophethood" anywhere in this book, and we are left with this most irrational of statements. Similarly, Allamah Majlisi states that the "Imams" are Prophets in the same way all the Prophets prior to Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) attained this rank, thus stopping just short of equating the "Imams" with Muhammad's (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) position. However, in this case as well, the statement leaves the objective reader in a great deal of bewilderment.

I am aware that Shias formally declare the finality of Prophethood with the coming of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). However, it is difficult to reconcile the full "finality" of Prophethood if there is a group of people who have passed through the rank and position of Nubuwwah, and according to many Shia scholars, have surpassed it and occupy a position of a higher order.

In conclusion, Ayah 2:124 has been used by Shias to advance their arguments about "Imamah". However, a close look at the specific arguments used by the Shia in this respect show that a great deal of hard-headedness and biased thinking has gone into advancing such points of view. In other cases, declarations that cause confusion and shock among the neutral Muslim reader have been employed. A level-headed person can never accept such statements, simply because they constitute a serious deviation from Islamic teaching, and are basically statements of groups that are outside the pale of Islam.

Considering all this, the only possible position is that Ayah 2:124 does not refer to "Imamah" as understood in Shiaism, but to a general leadership without theological ramifications.

The overall conclusion about Imams in the Qur'an

It is easy to see that the word "Imam" does not refer to the Shia concept of Imamah as far as the Qur'an is concerned. Reviewing all the cases I went through, I could see:

- Three cases (Ayahs 15:79, 11:17, and 46:12) where the "Imam" is not a human, so this cannot refer to an "Infallible Imam".
- Two more cases (Ayahs 9:12 and 28:41) where the "Imams" are human but are evil, so again these are not "Imams" in a Religious sense
- One case (Ayah 36:12) where it is generally agreed that the "Imam" refers to a Book, the Preserved Tablet. The narrations pointing to Ali as the Imam lack sufficient supporting evidence from the Qur'an in terms of its wording, and therefore should be rejected.
- Two cases (Ayahs 28:5 and 32:24) where the Israelites have been mentioned as "Imams". However, in the first case, the reference is clearly tangible material leadership on the earth. In the second, the conditions of Imamah in Shiaism are not met, as the appearance of the Imams is tied to the patience of the Israelites.

- One instance (Ayah 25:74) that cannot refer to a Religious Imamah because the leaders in this case have become so due to their prayers and general good deeds, not due to Infallible protection or status.
- One more case (Ayah 17:71) where the Sunni and Shia commentaries do not agree as to whether “Imam” refers to a human or to a book. Even if taken as a human, no mention of Infallibility is stated (evil Imams are also included), and the correspondence is between an “Imam” and a nation, rather than an “Imam” and a period, as it should be in the Shia belief.
- One example (Ayah 21:73) where the qualities of the “Imams” are no different from those of a normal Prophet. In addition, one of the “Imams” (Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam)) does not fulfil the conditions of Imamah in Shiaism.
- The final occurrence (in Ayah 2:124) where a number of points that are inconsistent with the Qur’an are brought up in order to tie a “Non-Thaalim” to an Infallible. In addition, the narrations brought up in order to defend Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) as an “Imam” in the theological sense raise great problems and irrationalities for the Muslim mind.

Therefore, none of the occurrences of the word “Imam” in the Qur’an can possibly be taken to mean “Infallible Imamah” as understood by the Shia. My conclusion in this respect was that the concept of “Infallible Imamah” is not harmonious with the word “Imam” in the Qur’an, and that in some cases, the word serves to undermine and contradict this Shia doctrine.

“NABIS” AND “RASOOLS” IN THE QUR’AN

After going through the instances where the word “Imam” is mentioned in the Qur’an and determining that none of them proves nor supports the concept of Imamah in Shiaism, it was only appropriate to examine the context and meaning provided to the words “Nabi” and “Rasool” in the Qur’an.

Examining the Word Nabi in the Qur’an

The case with the usage of the word Nabi is quite different from that of the word Imam. While the root word from which “Nabi” originates is used in different ways, such as “Naba” (news), “Naba’tukuma” (inform you), “Anba’aka” (informed you), the terms Nabi and Nabieen/Anbiyaa (plural forms of Nabi) themselves are used in a very specific manner in the Holy Qur’an. From the approximately 80 instances wherein the words Nabi or Nabieen occur, not one of them refers to anything other than a Prophet of Allah.[106]

Below is a list of a few instances when the word Nabi is used in the Qur’an. The list is categorized, to show that Allah has revealed a variety of topics surrounding His Prophets.

Rejecting, Killing Nabis without just cause and its punishment

(ضُرِبَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ الدَّلَّةُ أَيْنَ مَا تُقِفُوا إِلَّا بِحَبْلٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَحَبْلِ مِّنَ النَّاسِ وَبَآؤُوا بِغَضَبٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَضُرِبَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ الْمَسْكَنَةُ ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَانُوا يَكْفُرُونَ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَيَقْتُلُونَ الْأَنْبِيَاءَ بِغَيْرِ حَقٍّ ذَلِكَ بِمَا عَصَوْا وَكَانُوا يَعْتَدُونَ)

Ignominy shall be their portion wheresoever they are found save (where they grasp) a rope from Allah and a rope from men. They have incurred anger from their Lord, and wretchedness is laid upon them. That is because they used to disbelieve the revelations of Allah, and slew the prophets wrongfully. That is because they were rebellious and used to transgress. (Qur’an 3:112)

True Believers accept all Nabis of Allah

(قُلْ آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا أُنزِلَ عَلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنزِلَ عَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ وَالنَّبِيُّونَ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْهُمْ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ)

Say (O Muhammad): We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was vouchsafed unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered. (Qur'an 3:84)

Belief in the Nabis is a basis of faith

(وَلَكِنَّ الْبِرَّ مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةِ وَالْكِتَابِ وَالنَّبِيِّينَ)

...but righteous is he who believeth in Allah and the Last Day and the angels and the Scripture and the prophets... (Qur'an 2:177)

Allah sending Nabis as bringers of both good news and warnings

(كَانَ النَّاسُ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً فَبَعَثَ اللَّهُ النَّبِيِّينَ مُبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنْذِرِينَ وَأَنْزَلَ مَعَهُمُ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ لِيَحْكُمَ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ فِي مَا اخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ)

Mankind were one community, and Allah sent (unto them) prophets as bearers of good tidings and as warners, and revealed therewith the Scripture with the truth that it might judge between mankind concerning that wherein they differed... (Qur'an 2:213)

Allah's Covenants with the Nabis

(وَإِذْ أَخَذَ اللَّهُ مِيثَاقَ النَّبِيِّينَ لَمَا آتَيْنَاكُمْ مِنْ كِتَابٍ وَحِكْمَةٍ ثُمَّ جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولٌ مُصَدِّقٌ لِمَا مَعَكُمْ لَتُؤْمِنُنَّ بِهِ وَلَتَنْصُرُنَّهُ قَالَ أَأَقْرَرْتُمْ وَأَخَذْتُمْ عَلَىٰ ذَلِكُمْ إِصْرِي قَالُوا أَقْرَرْنَا قَالَ فَاشْهَدُوا وَأَنَا مَعَكُمْ مِنَ الشَّاهِدِينَ)

When Allah made (His) covenant with the prophets, (He said): Behold that which I have given you of the Scripture and knowledge. And afterward there will come unto you a messenger, confirming that which ye possess. Ye shall believe in him and ye shall help him. He said: Do ye agree, and will ye take up My burden (which I lay upon you) in this (matter)? They answered: We agree. He said: Then bear ye witness. I will be a witness with you. (Qur'an 3:81)

Forbidden to take Nabis as Lords

(وَلَا يُأْمُرُكُمْ أَنْ تَتَّخِذُوا الْمَلَائِكَةَ وَالنَّبِيِّينَ أَرْبَابًا أَيَأْمُرُكُمْ بِالْكُفْرِ بَعْدَ إِذْ أَنْتُمْ مُسْلِمُونَ)

And he commanded you not that ye should take the angels and the prophets for lords. Would he command you to disbelieve after ye had surrendered (to Allah)? (Qur'an 3:80)

Some Nabis favoured over others

(وَرَبُّكَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَلَقَدْ فَضَّلْنَا بَعْضَ النَّبِيِّينَ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَآتَيْنَا دَاوُودَ زَبُورًا)

And thy Lord is Best Aware of all who are in the heavens and the earth. And we preferred some of the prophets above others, and unto David We gave the Psalms. (Qur'an 17:55)

Nabis sent to previous nations

(وَكَمْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ نَبِيٍّ فِي الْأَوَّلِينَ)

How many a prophet did We send among the men of old! (Qur'an 43:6)

The reader may think of other categories where to place some of these Verses in addition to the ones provided, and there exist many other cases when the word “Nabi” is used in the Qur'an that are not listed (this would prove repetitive in the context of the discussion).

From the few examples provided, it is obvious that the term is used with the meaning of “Prophet of Allah” and nothing else. The Sunni and Shia commentaries do not even spend time in trying to prove that the instances of “Nabi” mentioned in the Qur'an refer to a Prophet sent on a mission from Allah. This is because the inference is so obvious it needs little explanation. Even the most bitter enemy of Islam does not attempt to show that “Nabi” means some other type of “Prophet” that is not related to its religious connotation.

The different ways in which the functions and roles of the Prophets are delineated in the Qur'anic verses themselves is very straightforward, while the term “Imam” is not treated in such clarity. I personally found myself amazed at such a contrast. The reason for this is the weight given to the doctrine of Imamah in Shaism to the point that many Shia scholars consider it as being higher than Nubuwwah. It seems strange that in the “more important” case only 12 examples are mentioned, some of which go against the doctrine under discussion, while the “less important” dogma has been mentioned much more often (almost seven-fold), all of them pointing towards “Divine Prophethood”.

Examining the Ayahs of the Qur'an it is seen that there is not a single Verse with the word “Nabi” that speaks against the concept of Nubuwwah. Moreover, the belief of Nubuwwah can easily be put together by using the Qur'an as the prime reference without stretching the meaning of any of the Ayahs. Later it will be seen that some of the Verses discussing Prophets and Messengers contradict and seriously undermine the essence of the Shia Imamah doctrine. For the time being however, it is enough to note the difference

between the manner in which Nabis and Imams are discussed in the Qur'an in terms of the clarity and importance given to each of them.

Examining the Word Rasool in the Qur'an

The next matter to look into is the Qur'an's usage of the word "Rasool" (Messenger). Like in the previous case with the word "Nabi", the root word has been used in different ways, with the terms "Arsalnaa", "Arsala", "Yursil" sometimes referring to Allah sending Messengers, or to Allah sending a punishment, or at other times to a Ruler sending a delegation.

However, with respect to the specific word Rasool (and its plural "Mursalin"/"Rusul"), it is seen that the total number of times the term has been used exceeds 360 times. There are a few instances (around 15) where the Messenger being referred to is either an Angel, or a Messenger that is not divinely sent. However, in the remaining cases (about 350 cases) it can be seen that the Rasool is in effect a human sent by Allah to declare His religion to a given people. So yet again, the level of clarity the Qur'an uses in describing Rasools and its coherence with Islamic belief is quite unlike the comparison between the term "Imam" and the doctrine of "Imamah" in Shiaism.

Again, some of the places where the word Rasool has been used are presented below, placed in categories for us to understand the various ways in which the Qur'an explains the role, function, and duties of Messengers:

Messengers sent to Every Nation

(وَلِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَسُولٌ فَإِذَا جَاءَ رَسُولُهُمْ قُضِيَ بَيْنَهُمْ بِالْقِسْطِ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ)

And for every nation there is a messenger. And when their messenger cometh (on the Day of Judgment) it will be judged between them fairly, and they will not be wronged. (Qur'an 10:47)

People will not be punished until a Messenger is sent to them

(مَنْ اهْتَدَىٰ فَإِنَّمَا يَهْتَدِي لِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ ضَلَّٰ فَإِنَّمَا يَضِلُّ عَلَيْهَا وَلَا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ وَمَا كُنَّا مُعَذِّبِينَ حَتَّىٰ نَبْعَثَ رَسُولًا)

Whosoever goeth right, it is only for (the good of) his own soul that he goeth right, and whosoever erreth, erreth only to its hurt. No laden soul can bear another's load, We never punish until we have sent a messenger. (Qur'an 17:15)

Peoples Rejecting Messengers

(وَلَقَدْ كُذِّبَتْ رُسُلٌ مِّن قَبْلِكَ فَصَبَرُوا عَلَىٰ مَا كُذِّبُوا وَأَوْدُوا حَتَّىٰ أَتَاهُمْ نَصْرُنَا وَلَا مُبَدِّلَ لِكَلِمَاتِ اللَّهِ وَلَقَدْ جَاءَكَ مِن نَّبِإِ الْمُرْسَلِينَ)

Messengers indeed have been denied before thee, and they were patient under the denial and the persecution till Our succour reached them. There is none to alter the decisions of

Allah. Already there hath reached thee (somewhat) of the tidings of the messengers (We sent before). (Qur'an 6:34)

Punishment for those who reject the Messengers of Allah

(وَلَقَدْ أَهْلَكْنَا الْقُرُونََ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ لَمَّا ظَلَمُوا وَجَاءَهُمْ رُسُلُهُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَمَا كَانُوا لِيُؤْمِنُوا كَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي الْقَوْمَ الْمُجْرِمِينَ)

We destroyed the generations before you when they did wrong; and their messengers (from Allah) came unto them with clear proofs (of His Sovereignty) but they would not believe. Thus do We reward the guilty folk. (Qur'an 10:13)

Belief in Messengers as a Pillar of Faith

(آمَنَ الرَّسُولُ بِمَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ رَبِّهِ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ كُلُّ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَكُتُبِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْ رُسُلِهِ وَقَالُوا سَمِعْنَا وَأَطَعْنَا غُفْرَانَكَ رَبَّنَا وَإِلَيْكَ الْمَصِيرُ)

The messenger believeth in that which hath been revealed unto him from his Lord and (so do) believers. Each one believeth in Allah and His angels and His scriptures and His messengers - We make no distinction between any of His messengers - and they say: We hear, and we obey. (Grant us) Thy forgiveness, our Lord. Unto Thee is the journeying. (Qur'an 2:285)

(يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا آمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَالْكِتَابِ الَّذِي نَزَّلَ عَلَى رَسُولِهِ وَالْكِتَابِ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِاللَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَكُتُبِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ فَقَدْ ضَلَّ ضَلَالًا بَعِيدًا)

O ye who believe! Believe in Allah and His messenger and the Scripture which He hath revealed unto His messenger, and the Scripture which He revealed aforetime. Whoso disbelieveth in Allah and His angels and His scriptures and His messengers and the Last Day, he verily hath wandered far astray. (Qur'an 4:136)

Some of the Messengers' stories have been told to us, some have not

(وَرُسُلًا قَدْ قَصَصْنَاهُمْ عَلَيْكَ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَرُسُلًا لَمْ نَقْصُصْهُمْ عَلَيْكَ وَكَلَّمَ اللَّهُ مُوسَى تَكْلِيمًا)

And messengers We have mentioned unto thee before and messengers We have not mentioned unto thee; and Allah spake directly unto Moses; (Qur'an 4:164)

Purpose of Messengers

(رُسُلًا مُبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنْذِرِينَ لِئَلَّا يَكُونَ لِلنَّاسِ عَلَى اللَّهِ حُجَّةٌ بَعْدَ الرُّسُلِ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا)

Messengers of good cheer and of warning, in order that mankind might have no argument against Allah after the messengers. Allah was ever Mighty, Wise. (Qur'an 4:165)

(وَأَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَاحْذَرُوا فَإِن تَوَلَّيْتُمْ فَأَعْلَمُوا أَنَّمَا عَلَى رَسُولِنَا الْبَلَاغُ الْمُبِينُ)

Obey Allah and obey the messenger, and beware! But if ye turn away, then know that the duty of Our messenger is only plain conveyance (of the message). (Qur'an 5:92)

Disbelievers and Messengers on Day of Judgement

(هَلْ يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَّا تَأْوِيلَهُ يَوْمَ يَأْتِي تَأْوِيلَهُ يَقُولُ الَّذِينَ نَسَوْهُ مِن قَبْلُ قَدْ جَاءَتْ رُسُلُ رَبِّنَا بِالْحَقِّ فَهَل لَّنَا مِن شُفْعَاءَ فَيَشْفَعُوا لَنَا أَوْ نُرَدُّ فَنَعْمَلَ غَيْرَ الَّذِي كُنَّا نَعْمَلُ قَدْ خَسِرُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ وَضَلَّ عَنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يَفْتَرُونَ)

Await they ought save the fulfilment thereof? On the day when the fulfilment thereof cometh, those who were before forgetful thereof will say: The messengers of our Lord did bring the Truth! Have we any intercessors, that they may intercede for us? Or can we be returned (to life on earth), that we may act otherwise than we used to act? They have lost their souls, and that which they devised hath failed them. (Qur'an 7:53)

Believers and Messengers on Day of Judgement

(وَنَزَعْنَا مَا فِي صُدُورِهِم مِّنْ غَلٍّ تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهِمُ الْأَنْهَارُ وَقَالُوا الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي هَدَانَا لِهَذَا وَمَا كُنَّا لِنَهْتَدِيَ لَوْلَا أَن هَدَانَا اللَّهُ لَقَدْ جَاءَتْ رُسُلُ رَبِّنَا بِالْحَقِّ وَنُودُوا أَن تِلْكَ الْجَنَّةُ الَّتِي كُنتُمْ تُعْمَلُونَ)

And We remove whatever rancour may be in their hearts. Rivers flow beneath them. And they say: The praise to Allah, Who hath guided us to this. We could not truly have been led aright if Allah had not guided us. Verily the messengers of our Lord did bring the Truth. And it is cried unto them: This is the Garden. Ye inherit it for what ye used to do. (Qur'an 7:43)

Messengers put under hardship

(حَتَّىٰ إِذَا اسْتَيْئَسَ الرُّسُلُ وَظَنُّوا أَنَّهُمْ قَدْ كُذِّبُوا جَاءَهُمْ نَصْرُنَا فَنُجِّيَ مَنْ نَشَاءُ
وَلَا يُرَدُّ بَأْسُنَا عَنِ الْقَوْمِ الْمُجْرِمِينَ)

Till, when the messengers despaired and thought that they were denied, then came unto them Our help, (Qur'an 12:110)

Believing in Allah and His Messengers as a way to Sincerity and Paradise

(وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الصَّادِقُونَ وَالشَّهَدَاءُ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ لَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ
وَنُورُهُمْ)

And those who believe in Allah and His messengers, they are the loyal, and the martyrs are with their Lord; they have their reward and their light; (Qur'an 57:19)

Thus, it is seen that the way the word “Rasool” has been mentioned in the Qur'an is even more commanding and authoritative than for the word “Nabi”. Only 13 of the occurrences of the word “Rasool” were included above, and yet there can be no doubt as to what type of “Messenger” the Qur'an is referring to. As noted before, there are a few cases in which the word “Rasool” has been used outside of its religious meaning or has been used with respect to non-human Messengers. Yet the total number of occurrences where the Messenger being alluded to is in line with Islamic doctrine are so many and so unambiguous that only a fanatic would deny the importance Allah has placed upon the concept of “Risaalah” in the Qur'an. Even if a person with minimal knowledge on how to interpret the Qur'an were to give his opinion about these Verses, we would find that his understanding in many cases corresponds closely to that of the expert scholars of Islam. This is due to the radiating clarity with which many of these Ayahs have been revealed. Again, if we were to compare it with the “higher” principle of Imamah, we would see the weakness of the Shia arguments.

I started to see the difference between what the Shia scholars were stating in terms of the importance of Imamah and what Allah Himself has said in the Qur'an. Was it only a coincidence that the manners in which these doctrines are discussed are so vastly different? Or is it because Imamah is not part of the Islam revealed to Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam), and is the product of a different outlook?

GENERAL AND SPECIFIC VERSES OF THE QUR'AN AND PROBLEMS WITH IMAMAH

As I was reading the Qur'an looking for the instances of the words Imam, Rasul, and Nabi in its different aspects, I noticed many Verses that put the Shia doctrine of Imamah under further problems.

There a number of broad ideas of Imamah in Shiaism that clash with the Qur'an. These can be categorized under the following topics:

- The idea that the Imam is the main unit of guidance.
- The notion that there is an Imam for every time.
- The belief that the entire world should recognize one Imam.

- The notion that the Imam is the best of all humans in all virtues, especially in terms of his knowledge and wisdom.
- The belief that the coming of the Imams has been foretold by the previous Prophets and Messengers.

Some of the problems these notions have with the Qur'an were briefly explored in the previous sections. In this chapter, a series of Verses will be presented that portrays this lack of correspondence between Shiaism and the Qur'an in clearer terms, and that showed for me many of the serious deficiencies in Shia doctrine that may be overlooked by other researchers.

First General Problem: Is the Imam the main source of guidance?

The Shia insistence on Imamah as a supposed central doctrine in Islam is an indication that the "Imam" should be the main source of bringing the people out of their darkness and showing them the truth. Notwithstanding, this assumption is put under severe strain due to the confusion of the Imami Shias with respect to when Prophets became "Imams" and started to guide their people under this "superior" position of authority, and the fact that none of the Prophets mentioned in the Qur'an ever presented himself as an "Imam" to his nation.

When did the other Prophets become "Imams"?

One of the unanswered problems of the Imami Shias is with respect to explaining who was an Imam and who was a Prophet. Outside of Ibrahim's (Alayhi Salaam) case, they cannot say for sure when certain Prophets became "Infallible Imams".

Many ordinary Shias say that these noble figures were appointed Imams at the same moment they became Prophets. Nevertheless, the case of Ibrahim as explained by Shia scholars in this Verse shows otherwise... a Prophet does not become an Imam until he reaches a "higher level of spirituality", a stage that according to the Shia scholars may not come until very late in the Prophet's life.

To take the case a little further, there is no way to know when Ishaq (Alayhi Salaam) or Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) became "Imams", since Shias mention no incident about their "appointment to Imamah". If it is supposed that Ishaq (Alayhi Salaam) was named by Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam), and Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) was named by Ishaq (Alayhi Salaam), the question would arise as to why Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) was named as Imam by Allah in such a direct manner, rather than (as the Shias believe should be the case) a will from his "predecessor".

In any case, this would answer the paradox for three "Imams" only. There would still be hundreds or thousands of "Prophet-Imams" about whom it is not known when they were "elevated to Imamah". It must be remembered that the time when the Imam "leads the faithful of the world" is of more importance to the Shia than where he lives. For me, this turned out to be one of the more problematic issues with the Imami Shias, since it was obvious their scholars had not paid much attention to it outside of Verse 2:124.

How do they present themselves?

It would be of utmost importance for the holy personalities sent by Allah to make extremely clear from the very outset of their mission exactly who they are and what they have been sent for. It is seen from the Qur'an that the Messengers of Allah go to their people and specifically inform them about their position as "Rasools" of Allah. The following examples can be provided in connection to this issue:

(لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا نُوحًا إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِ فَقَالَ يَا قَوْمِ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ مَا لَكُمْ مِنْ إِلَهٍ غَيْرُهُ إِنِّي أَخَافُ عَلَيْكُمْ عَذَابَ يَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ . قَالَ الْمَلَأُ مِنْ قَوْمِهِ إِنَّا لَنَرَاكَ فِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ .

قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ لَيْسَ بِي ضَلَالَةٌ وَلَكِنِّي رَسُولٌ مِّن رَّبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ)

We sent Noah (of old) unto his people, and he said: O my people! Serve Allah. Ye have no other Allah save Him. Lo! I fear for you the retribution of an Awful Day. The chieftains of his people said: Lo! we see thee surely in plain error. He said: O my people! There is no error in me, but I am a messenger from the Lord of the Worlds. (Qur'an 7:59-61)

(وَإِلَىٰ عَادٍ أَخَاهُمْ هُودًا قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ مَا لَكُمْ مِنْ إِلَهٍ غَيْرُهُ أَفَلَا تَتَّقُونَ . قَالَ الْمَلَأُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ قَوْمِهِ إِنَّا لَنَرَاكَ فِي سَفَاهَةٍ وَإِنَّا لَنَظُنُّكَ مِنَ الْكَاذِبِينَ . قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ لَيْسَ بِي سَفَاهَةٌ وَلَكِنِّي رَسُولٌ مِّن رَّبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ)

And unto (the tribe of) A'ad (We sent) their brother, Hud. He said: O my people! Serve Allah. Ye have no other Allah save Him. Will ye not ward off (evil)? The chieftains of his people, who were disbelieving, said: Lo! we surely see thee in foolishness, and lo! we deem thee of the liars. He said: O my people! There is no foolishness in me, but I am a messenger from the Lord of the Worlds. (Qur'an 7:65-67)

(كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ الْمُرْسَلِينَ . إِذْ قَالَ لَهُمْ أَخُوهُمْ صَالِحٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ . إِنِّي لَكُمْ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٌ)

(The tribe of) Thamud denied the messengers (of Allah) When their brother Salih said unto them: Will ye not ward off (evil)? Lo! I am a faithful messenger unto you (Qur'an 26:141-143)

(وَإِذْ قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ يَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ)

And when Jesus son of Mary said: O Children of Israel! Lo! I am the messenger of Allah unto you... (Qur'an 61:6)

(وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مُوسَىٰ بِآيَاتِنَا إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ وَمَلَئِهِ فَقَالَ إِنِّي رَسُولُ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ)

And verily We sent Moses with Our revelations unto Pharaoh and his chiefs, and he said: I am a messenger of the Lord of the Worlds. (Qur'an 43:46)

In the instances shown above, it can be observed that each Messenger of Allah went to his respective people and proclaimed that he was a Messenger sent from Allah to convey the true message to his people. It is essential to note that this announcement was made at the very beginning of the each Prophetic mission, so as to absolve these noble souls from any misinformation and falsehood that may have been attributed to them later.

By the same token, it would be expected for the "Imams" (such as Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam), Musa (Alayhi Salaam) and others whom the Shias say were Imams) to come to their people and give this important declaration to them, due to the overwhelming significance Imamah should have in the Divine Message. However, this is not the case ... there is no individual coming to his people at any time and presenting

himself as an "Imam" who will lead his nation out of darkness into light and give them divine guidance as a product of his position as "Imam". As seen in the previous sections, even in the few cases where Prophets become "Imams", there is no significant change in the mission of these Prophets, to the point that some Shia commentators themselves fail to see the difference in these cases.

This was an important observation I noted, since it made me realize that the concentration of Allah's messages were given by people who explicitly proclaimed their Messengership (and not their supposed "Imamah") even in the face of fierce opposition from all sides. It certainly was unreasonable that these great Men of Allah had simply forgotten to say they were "Imams" to the world if such a post was of the importance and weight the Shias have given to it. Also, it was highly unlikely that persecution and opposition did not prevent the "Prophet-Imams" from repeatedly portraying themselves as Prophets, but the same persecution would force them to remain silent about being Imams.

Second General Problem: Prophets for every nation, Imams for every time?

The theoretical foundation of Imamah rests on the supposition that an Imam is sent for every time. This is why according to the Shias Imamah continues to this day, since it is a continuous institution that can never be broken.

However, it is interesting to note that the Qur'an does not say anything at all about there being a correspondence between time and a Divine Imam, or even between time and a Messenger. Yet, we do find the following Verses in the Qur'an:

(وَلِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَسُولٌ فَإِذَا جَاءَ رَسُولُهُمْ قُضِيَ بَيْنَهُم بِالْقِسْطِ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ)

To every people (was sent) a messenger: when their messenger comes (before them), the matter will be judged between them with justice, and they will not be wronged. (Qur'an 10:47)

(وَلَقَدْ بَعَثْنَا فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَسُولًا أَنْ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَاجْتَنِبُوا الطَّاغُوتَ فَمِنْهُمْ مَنْ هَدَى اللَّهُ وَمِنْهُمْ مَنْ حَقَّتْ عَلَيْهِ الضَّلَالَةُ فَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَانظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الْمُكَذِّبِينَ)

For We assuredly sent amongst every People a messenger, (with the Command), "Serve Allah, and eschew Evil": of the People were some whom Allah guided, and some on whom error became inevitably (established). So travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those who denied (the Truth). (Qur'an 16:36)

Thus, the relationship in the Qur'an is set between a people and a Messenger, not only in these places, but in other parts of the Qur'an as well. The question that comes up is: If the concept of Imamah in reality is more important than Prophethood or at least should be on an equal footing for a person to have true belief, then why do we not see this important relationship between period and Imamah mentioned even once in the Qur'an?

Thus again, I was puzzled between the manner Shiaism treats Imamah and the way Allah treats it in the Qur'an.

Not until Allah sends a Prophet?

Under the same general trend, Allah has revealed Qur'anic Verses such as:

(وَمَا كَانَ رَبُّكَ مُهْلِكَ الْقُرَى حَتَّى يَبْعَثَ فِي أُمَمٍ رَسُولًا يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِنَا وَمَا كُنَّا مُهْلِكِي الْقُرَى إِلَّا وَأَهْلُهَا ظَالِمُونَ)

Nor was thy Lord the one to destroy a population until He had sent to its centre a messenger, rehearsing to them Our Signs; nor are We going to destroy a population except when its members practise iniquity. (Qur'an 28:59)

and

(رُسُلًا مُبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنذِرِينَ لِئَلَّا يَكُونَ لِلنَّاسِ عَلَى اللَّهِ حُجَّةٌ بَعْدَ الرُّسُلِ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا)

Messengers of good cheer and of warning, in order that mankind might have no argument against Allah after the messengers. Allah was ever Mighty, Wise. (Qur'an 4:165)

In the first Verse presented, it is stated that Allah would not destroy a people or nation until a Messenger had been sent by Allah "rehearsing to them Our Signs". From this the following can be concluded:

1. The criteria for the punishment of a people is based upon their attitude towards their Messengers/Prophets. It is noteworthy that the "sending of Imams" is not mentioned at all, even though this is the case to be expected, given the Shia idea with respect to the centrality of Imams with respect to the guidance of people.
2. As mentioned before, the implication in this and other similar Verses (such as Ayah 17:15) is that a people are relatively innocent of the faults they are committing until the time a Messenger comes to them.[107] If there had been an Imam among the nation, already offering guidance towards the path of Allah but being rejected by its inhabitants, then the sending of Messengers before destroying the people would have been redundant, since the Hujjah (proof of Allah) would have been present among them. If the Shia reasoning were to be applied further, it would be doubly irrelevant for Allah to send a Messenger at all, since the Imam's duty is greater than that of a Messenger.

Moving on to the second Verse it is seen that the Qur'an reiterates this line of reasoning in stronger terms. It is stated that the people will not have an argument regarding their misguidance once the messenger has been sent. Again, there is no mention of an "Imam" or any other Divine Representative in this respect.

While the Shias maintain that the "Imam" is always present among the inhabitants of the earth and it is the responsibility of the people to find out who he is and follow him accordingly, the Qur'an states otherwise, saying that the evidence is against the nation once the messenger is sent to them. It is amazing to note that the Messengers and Prophets are the prime source of guidance everywhere in the Qur'an... he does not "call people to the Imam" or remind them of the "negligence they were showing the Imam", but rather calls the erring people to reach guidance by following him directly.

List of Imams?

The Shia are fond of showing the Sunni side how the "12 Imams" are the true leaders of the Islamic community, and how no one else is worthy of being an "Imam". However, delving a bit deeper into the Imami Shia doctrine, it is seen that the Shia scholars are quite confused about the identity of the "Imams"

before the advent of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). Most Shias do not think about this at all, since the entire effort of the faith is to follow the “12 Imams” after the Prophet (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). Yet, if the proper consideration is put on the idea that there should be an Imam for each epoch as far as the Shia are concerned, it would be of paramount importance for there to be a total list of all the Imams from the time of Adam (Alayhi Salaam) up to now.

The truth is that there is no agreement among the Shia scholars as to the specific figures who occupied the position of “Imamah” prior to the coming of the Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). Yes, it is supposed that certain Prophets like Musa (Alayhi Salaam), Nuh (Alayhi Salaam), Isa (Alayhi Salaam), etc. were also “Imams”, but this is at most a partial answer to the problem (and as will be seen, this is also a faulty supposition).

The case of Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) and the Imam before him

As a direct consequence of the problem discussed above, the time frame of Ibrahim’s (Alayhi Salaam) Imamah should be considered, as well as whether it can blend into the overall Imamah concept as perceived by Shias.

If Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) was not an Imam for many years of his Prophethood, then this would mean that there was another person higher in status than himself who was occupying the post of Imam during this period of time. If the Shia position is taken as correct, Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) should have been the “follower” of this Imam during his “lower” positions of Prophet and Messenger. It is strange that Allah does not inform the Muslims of the identity of this person. In fact, Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) is always presented as the person calling others to follow his example, or he is presented as having followers (independent of any “higher” human authority), even before his supposed appointment as “Imam”. For example, in the case of Ibrahim and his father Azar, the Qur’an says:

(يَا أَبَتِ إِنِّي قَدْ جَاءَنِي مِنَ الْعِلْمِ مَا لَمْ يَأْتِكَ فَاتَّبِعْنِي أَهْدِكَ صِرَاطًا سَوِيًّا)

O my father! Lo! there hath come unto me of knowledge that which came not unto thee. So follow me, and I will lead thee on a right path. (Qur’an 19:43)

Also, Ibrahim's followers are presented in the Qur’an:

(قَدْ كَانَتْ لَكُمْ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ فِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَالَّذِينَ مَعَهُ إِذْ قَالُوا لِقَوْمِهِمْ إِنَّا بُرَاءُ مِنْكُمْ)

There is a goodly pattern for you in Abraham and those with him, when they told their folk: Lo! we are guiltless of you and all that ye worship beside Allah. (Qur’an 60:4)

It is easy to see that Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) was always calling people towards following him directly while he was “only a Prophet”. He never hinted towards the need to follow someone “above him” or an “Imam” anywhere in the Qur’an. Also, the Shias themselves have not attempted to decisively name who the “Divinely Appointed Imam” was during Ibrahim’s (Alayhi Salaam) Prophethood but before his Imamah. All these things point to the inevitable conclusion that there was no Imam during this time, and that the Imamah doctrine is faulty in its very basis.

Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) near his death and Imamah

The story of Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) and his plea to his children when his death was near also raises questions about Imamah. The Qur’an states:

(أَمْ كُنْتُمْ شُهَدَاءَ إِذْ حَضَرَ يَعْقُوبَ الْمَوْتُ إِذْ قَالَ لِبَنِيهِ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ بَعْدِي قَالُوا نَعْبُدُ إِلَهَكَ وَإِلَهَ آبَائِكَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ إِلَهًا وَاحِدًا وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ)

Or were ye present when death came to Jacob, when he said unto his sons: What will ye worship after me? They said: We shall worship thy god, the god of thy fathers, Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac, One Allah, and unto Him we have surrendered. (Qur'an 2:133)

It is clear that Yaqub (Alayhi Salaam) is putting a huge amount of emphasis on the Oneness of Allah, and that his children were meant to die only as Muslims. This is expected from a Prophet of Allah, since it constituted the basis of true faith.

But Yaqoob (Alayhi Salaam) is not mentioning anything about following the proper “Infallible Divine Imam” after his death, or who this “Imam” was. In Shia ideology, one of the actions every Prophet was very concerned about close to his death was for his disciples to follow the “true Imam”, since supposedly Imamah has been a priority since the beginning of human existence. From the analysis that was done in Chapter Three, it is known that there would be confusion concerning the Imam at the time of Yaqoob’s (Alayhi Salaam) death. Additionally, if Shia theology were correct, Yaqoob (Alayhi Salaam) would have pointed to his sons who they were to follow in “Imamah” after his death, and clear up the matter for the future generation. The contrast between the statement of the Qur’an and Shia ideology was again very clear for me.

Prophet Samuel, Talut, and kings appointed by Allah

Another example of the dilemma seen among the ranks of the Shias in terms of defending the concept of continuous Imamah is with relation with the Qur’anic story of Prophet Samuel, Talut, and the victory of the Israelites under Dawud (Alayhi Salaam). Allah starts the narration by saying:

(أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الْمَلَأِ مِنْ بَنِي إِسْرَآئِيلَ مِنْ بَعْدِ مُوسَى إِذْ قَالُوا لِنَبِيِّهِمْ أَهْمُ ابْعَثْ لَنَا مَلِكًا نُقَاتِلَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ)

Bethink thee of the leaders of the Children of Israel after Moses, how they said unto a prophet whom they had: Set up for us a king and we will fight in Allah's way. (Qur'an 2:246)

The following commentary provided by Ibn Kathir with respect to Ayah 2:246 is noteworthy, since it shows that the Israelites indeed had no Prophets for a certain period of time:

The Children of Israel remained on the straight path for a period of time after Moses. They then innovated in the religion and some of them even worshipped the idols. Yet, there were always Prophets sent among them who would command them to work righteous deeds, refrain from doing evil and who would rule them according to the commands of the Torah. When they (Israelites) committed the evil that they committed, Allah caused their enemies to overwhelm them, and many fatalities fell among them as a consequence. Their enemies also captured a great number of them, and took over large areas of their land. Earlier, anyone who would fight the Israelites would lose, because they had the Torah and the Tabut, which they inherited generation after generation ever since the time of Moses, who spoke to Allah directly. Yet, the Israelites kept indulging in misguidance until some king took the Tabut from them during a battle. That king also took possession of the Torah, and only a few of the Israelites who memorized it remained. The prophethood halted among their various tribes and only a pregnant woman remained of the offspring of Lavi (Levi), in whom the prophethood still appeared. Her husband had been killed, so the Israelites kept her in a house so that Allah may give her a boy, who would be their Prophet. The woman also kept invoking Allah to grant

her a boy. Allah heard her pleas and gave her a boy whom she called `Shamwil' meaning `Allah has heard my pleas.' Some people said that the boy's name was Sham`un (Simeon), which also has a similar meaning.[108]

The Shia commentary by Ayatullah Mahdi Puya also says a similar thing, although in a more precise form:

After Musa several prophets were sent to maintain his law (Tawrat), but as time passed, people started neglecting the law and took to idolatry. Ultimately a time came when the Jews had no prophet to guide them. In those days their enemies from the tribe of Jalut had captured all the land on the Mediterranean including Egypt and Palestine. They killed 440 princes and noblemen of Bani Israil and enslaved them. The Bani Israil prayed to Allah for a prophet. Allah appointed Samuel as their prophet.[109]

Going back to the commentary provided by Ayatullah Makarem Shirazi with respect to Verse 32:24, this type of occurrence was in agreement with a general pattern:

When the conditions changed, and people broke up into sects, and fell at variances and wrangling, they lost all their dignities, and suffered national annihilation.[110]

However, the most interesting opinion comes from Tafseer al-Qummi, where it is stipulated that Prophethood was in one tribe of the Israelites, while the Kingdom and the Authority were in another house, and the two posts were never from the same tribe. This is the reason why the existing leaders of the

Children of Israel told the Prophet: **ابْعَثْ لَنَا مَلِكًا** (Set up for us a king).[111] The importance of this particular comment is that in such a case, spiritual leadership and political leadership were not in the same person during the period of the Israelites before the coming of Talut. This would further put the Imamah theory under strain, and would make the question of who was the leader among the Children of Israel a moot subject (because such a leader, Prophet or otherwise, could never be the "Imam" as understood in Shiaism since he did not possess all leaderships at the same time. Thus, even if Talut had been appointed as the "Imam", there is no way to know who the previous Imam was before him, since Samuel would not be an "Imam" using the criteria above).

Thus, considering the interpretations of this Verse, it is obvious that even Shia scholars contradict the ideology that there is an Imam for every time.

The dilemma of Shias concerning Isa (Alayhi Salaam) and the Imamah up to Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam)

Another important case to ponder upon relates to the time between Isa (Alayhi Salaam) and Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). Even though the Shia belief would lead to the belief that there must have been an Imam who was known to all (or at least to the present-day Shias) the reality is that when Allah raised Isa (Alayhi Salaam) unto himself, the earth was devoid of a Hujjah. This view was explicitly stated by the Shiite scholar Al-Sadooq in his book Kamal Al-Din :

"The Messiah –as- has several ghaybas were he walked on earth and his people and shia did not know were he was, and then he appeared and made Simon ben Hamon his successor, and when Simon died the hujjas disappeared after him and the search was strong and the calamity was great such that the religion was fading and the rights were lost, and the obligations and sunnahs disappeared and people went right and left not distinguishing them from each other and the ghaybah lasted 250 years." [112]

Additionally, some of the answers from the Shia side points to the fact that even though the Shias believe that there was a Hujjah during this time, they do not have a clear idea as to who he was, and sometimes give responses that cannot be true when scrutinized. For example, the following response given by Allamah Sayed Muhammad Rizivi [113] about who was the Divine Imam between Jesus (Alayhi Salaam) and Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) should be considered:

Unfortunately, I do not recall any names in our sources among the disciples of Jesus as the guides after him. But I believe there must have been some who were true and uncorrupted in their belief in the nubuwat of 'Isa, and who continued to guide others and also foretold the coming of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.). For example, Salman al-Farsi, in his journey from Zoroastrianism to Christianity to Islam, was guided by a Christian holy man who gave him some specific signs to look for in the person of the last Messenger of God who he believed was to emerge during their time. And that is how Salman found his way to Islam and Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.).[114]

Again, no specific name is given as to who was a “Hujjah” or “Imam” for the people before the immediate advent of Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). From the general rule of the Imami Shia, Allamah Rizivi tries to answer the dilemma by stating that “there must have been some who were true and uncorrupted in their belief in the nubuwat of 'Isa, and who continued to guide others and also foretold the coming of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.)”. Then he proceeds to give the example of Salman al-Farsi and the Christian monk.

The problem with this hypothesis is that people who are “true and uncorrupted in their beliefs” are not necessarily Infallible. This is known from the discussion about “unjust persons” in the previous chapter, in addition to the fact that even the “holy men” in Shiaism today (such as the Ayatullahs and Allamahs) are not seen as “Infallible and Divinely appointed” by the Shia faithful.

You are the Witness over them...

The following Ayah is also very relevant when discussing Isa (Alayhi Salaam) and his “Infallible successor”:

(وَكُنْتُ عَلَيْهِمْ شَهِيدًا مَّا دُمْتُ فِيهِمْ فَلَمَّا تَوَفَّيْتَنِي كُنْتَ أَنْتَ الرَّقِيبَ عَلَيْهِمْ وَأَنْتَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ)

I was a witness of them while I dwelt among them, and when Thou tookest me Thou wast the Watcher over them. Thou art Witness over all things. (Qur'an 5:117)

In the first part of this Ayah, Isa (Alayhi Salaam) says that he was aware of the deeds of the people while he was amongst them, while after his ascension, Allah was the only One who knew what the nation was doing.

It is known that Allah is always the watcher and witness over the people's deeds. However, Isa (Alayhi Salaam) mentions himself as the witness amongst the Israelites because he was the Prophet sent to them. It is puzzling as to why Isa (Alayhi Salaam) does not mention any “Infallible Imam” as the person who kept watch over the Children of Israel after his departure. According to the Shia faith, Isa (Alayhi Salaam) did in fact appoint someone to succeed him before he left, yet there is no trace of him neither in this Ayah nor in the other Verses (such as 2:252, 19:37, etc.) that mention the problems that arose after Isa's (Alayhi Salaam) ascension. All this throws into doubt the theory that Isa (Alayhi Salaam) appointed an “Infallible Imam” to succeed him, and the best that can be supposed is that any successor after Isa (Alayhi Salaam) was fallible and not a "Divinely Appointed Imam".

General Problem Three: Proof for all of humanity?

In addition to the above, I noticed contradictory and inconsistent remarks from part of the Shia about the universal nature of the Imam's duty. It starts from considering the following Verse:

(وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانِ قَوْمِهِ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمْ فَيُضِلُّ اللَّهُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ)

And We never sent a messenger save with the language of his folk, that he might make (the message) clear for them. Then Allah sendeth whom He will astray, and guideth whom He will. He is the Mighty, the Wise. (Qur'an 14:4)

The mention of sending Messengers in the language of a people may seem as an obvious issue, yet there are important lessons to be learned from this Verse:

1. Allah says that he has never sent a Messenger except in the language of his people. By deduction, it is understood that every Prophet and Messenger prior to the advent of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) was sent as a local warner, rather than to the world at large. Consequently, if the Prophet or Messenger were to "appoint" an Imam to take over the responsibilities of protecting the religion after his death, his scope would also be limited to the local sphere. This is important to observe, since if the "Imam's" responsibility is global as the Shia see it, restricting his scope to a local mission does not correspond to his task.
2. There is an issue that may be raised up about there being multiple Imams at one time. However, in the beginning of this work it was noted that the individual who has been granted the Imamah excels every other person in every virtue. It is clear that these guidelines would necessarily restrict the Imamah to exactly one person for each time frame, even if there are a multitude of Infallible persons.
3. If it is assumed that indeed there can be multiple Infallible Guides at the same time for a variety of places, then this would force us to say that Allah should have appointed, prior to the advent of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam), one Imam or Guide for every single town or village on Earth. This is in view of the following reasons:
 - a. Allah has clearly said that there has been no nation, save a Prophet has passed through it (at some point in its history).
 - b. If the Shia idea of necessity for divine preservation of the religion and the obligation of a Messenger to appoint a successor is considered, this would mean that every single Messenger left an Imam to protect the religion. It would be highly unfair to say that only the Israelites had continuous divine protection of their religion (through a continuous line of Imams), while the rest of the world was left on its own. Whether the society knew of this Imam is irrelevant for this case since the area of discussion should first focus on the existence of the Imam.

However, this incongruence is not even mentioned or thought of when formulating the theory of Imamah by the Imami Shias. There may be an effort to show that certain nations had "Imams" among them, or that "large areas" had an "Infallible Imam", but from the standpoint of how Imamah is designed to work universally, this raises more questions than it answers.

Objections to this view

There have been some who oppose the idea that the Messenger sent for a people was to accomplish his duties only among the people he was sent to. For example, the interpretation by Ayatullah Mahdi Puya regarding this Verse says:

To every people was sent a messenger of Allah who conveyed the divine message to them in their language, but it did not restrict his mission to that particular people. Through them it reached all mankind.

The most distressed area was selected to start the campaign of "guidance unto order through knowledge of divine laws" to put an end to disorder and ignorance prevailing in the society, which also served other such areas. As a matter of course the language of the people who were originally addressed had to be used.[115]

However, this is at most speculation from the Shia scholar's part. Ayatullah Mahdi Puya goes on to give one example, that of Isa (Alayhi Salaam), mentioning that he was sent to the Israelites specifically, "but today he is accepted as a universal teacher".

Using the example of Isa (Alayhi Salaam) as a universal teacher is incorrect, because his "universal teaching" came about solely due to the corruption his original message suffered at the hands of treacherous personalities. As many of us Muslims know, the rapid spread of Christianity to all corners of the world happened at the expense of the pure teachings of Isa (Alayhi Salaam), as many of the Jewish-based practices were cast aside and pagan rituals were introduced in order to gain converts from among the Greeks, Romans, and other non-Jewish races. Even today, the Churches sacrifice their main rituals, replacing them with more "society-friendly" practices simply in order to attract the local population to the Church.

In addition to this, the more established Shia commentaries do not mention this idea, but rather reinforce the notion that the previous Messengers were sent to the specific people only. As a case in point, the Tafseer al-Safi quotes a narration wherein Allah tells Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) that every Prophet was sent to his people in their language but he (i.e. Muhammad) has been sent "to every red and black-skinned person of My Creation".[116]

Indeed, this idea is continuously reinforced in the Holy Qur'an, as the Prophets of previous nations are often shown intertwined with the people they were sent to, and viceversa. For example, the Qur'an says:

أَلَمْ يَأْتِهِمْ نَبَأُ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ قَوْمِ نُوحٍ وَعَادٍ وَثَمُودَ وَقَوْمِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَأَصْحَابِ مَدْيَنَ
وَالْمُؤْتَفِكَاتِ أَتَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُم بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ فَمَا كَانُوا لِيُظِلِّمَهُمُ اللَّهُ لِيُظْلِمَهُمْ وَلَكِنْ كَانُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ
يُظْلِمُونَ

Hath not the fame of those before them reached them - the folk of Noah, A'ad, Thamud, the folk of Abraham, the dwellers of Midian and the disasters (which befell them)? Their messengers (from Allah) came unto them with proofs (of Allah's Sovereignty). So Allah surely wronged them not, but they did wrong themselves. (Qur'an 9:70)

أَلَا بُعْدًا لِعَادٍ قَوْمِ هُودٍ

A far removal for A'ad, the folk of Hud! (Qur'an 11:60)

وَيَا قَوْمِ لَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شِقَاقِي أَنْ يُصِيبَكُمْ مِثْلُ مَا أَصَابَ قَوْمَ نُوحٍ أَوْ قَوْمَ هُودٍ أَوْ
قَوْمَ صَالِحٍ وَمَا قَوْمُ لُوطٍ مِنْكُمْ بِبَعِيدٍ

And, O my people! Let not the schism with me cause you to sin so that there befall you that which befell the folk of Noah and the folk of Hud, and the folk of Salih; and the folk of Lot are not far off from you. (Qur'an 11:89)

In the cases presented above and in other instances in the Holy Qur'an, it is obvious that there was a specific Prophet sent to a given people, whose job was to convey the message to that nation specifically. That is why it can be easily deduced that Thamud were the people to whom Salih (Alayhi Salaam) was sent

to, Hud (Alayhi Salaam) to the people of 'Ad, Shuaib (Alayhi Salaam) to the Midyan people, Lut (Alayhi Salaam) and Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) to their respective nations, while the Children of Israel benefited from a series of Prophets and Messengers including Musa (Alayhi Salaam), Dawud (Alayhi Salaam), Sulayman (Alayhi Salaam), and Isa (Alayhi Salaam). In all these cases prior to the coming of Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam), there is no mention of these Prophets and Messengers travelling around the whole world or telling their followers to spread the message to every single corner of the globe. The truth is that their mission was limited and even if it reached large stretches of land, it still did not have the dimension of universality attached to the final message of Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam).

Finally, the following comment by Allamah Sayyed Muhammad Rizivi can be quoted in this respect:

... not all the prophets were sent for the entire mankind. The nubuwwat of Prophet 'Isa (a.s.) was not universal; he was not sent for all the people; he was sent only as a nabi for the Israelites. This is also confirmed by the statements of Jesus quoted in the present-day New Testament where he says, "I have not been sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Therefore, we see that while the children of Israel followed their prophets from the line of Ishāq bin Ibrahim, Ismail bin Ibrahim was sent as a prophet to the Arab people.[117]

Thus, the proper meaning of this Ayah is that all Prophets have been sent to their specific peoples in their own language. The assumption from part of the Shias that an Imam has a universal responsibility is deeply weakened by the fact that all of the Prophets before Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) had a mission for their own people only.

From these few examples, the objective reader can see that the foundation of the Imamah belief is not based on Qur'anic Verses, for there exist Ayahs that essentially contradict the philosophy behind Imamah and the pillars upon which it rests.

General Problem Four: The most knowledgeable?

One of the criterias of Imamah according to the Shia faith is that the Imam is the person endowed with the highest degree of knowledge and wisdom among all the inhabitants of the earth. Thus, no one can excel him in any branch of knowledge regardless of the amount of time he may have studied, nor can pass a judgement better than his in any case whatsoever.

In spite of this assertion, there are certain passages in the Qur'an where the question arises as to whether the supposed "Infallible Imam" was in reality fulfilling the condition of being the most knowledgeable person of his time. The four cases shown below assume that Prophets Musa (Alayhi Salaam), Dawud (Alayhi Salaam), and Zakariya (Alayhi Salaam) were the "Imams" when the situation took place. Obviously, even this is not known for sure (given the confusion of the Shias in this respect as was discussed before). Nonetheless, since this is the assumption Shias work with, it is proper to look at it from their viewpoint.

The case of Musa (Alayhi Salaam) and Khidr

One of the Qur'anic stories against the Shia concept of Imamah is with respect to the journey of Musa (Alayhi Salaam) and his experience with Khidr. The episode is narrated in the Holy Qur'an as follows in Surah Al-Kahf (Chapter 18):

(فَوَجَدَا عَبْدًا مِّنْ عِبَادِنَا آتَيْنَاهُ رَحْمَةً مِّنْ عِنْدِنَا وَعَلَّمْنَاهُ مِن لَّدُنَّا عِلْمًا . قَالَ لَهُ مُوسَىٰ هَلْ أَتَّبِعُكَ عَلَىٰ أَن تُعَلِّمَنِي مِمَّا عَلَّمْتَ رُسُدًا . قَالَ إِنَّكَ لَن تَسْتَطِيعَ مَعِيَ

صَبْرًا . وَكَيْفَ تَصْبِرُ عَلَى مَا لَمْ تُحِطْ بِهِ خُبْرًا . قَالَ سَتَجِدُنِي إِن شَاءَ اللَّهُ صَابِرًا وَلَا أَعْصِي لَكَ أَمْرًا . قَالَ فَإِنِ اتَّبَعْتَنِي فَلَا تَسْأَلْنِي عَنْ شَيْءٍ حَتَّى أُحْدِثَ لَكَ مِنْهُ ذِكْرًا . فَانْطَلَقَا حَتَّى إِذَا رَكِبَا فِي السَّفِينَةِ خَرَقَهَا قَالَ أَخَرَقْتَهَا لِتُغْرَقَ أَهْلُهَا لَقَدْ جِئْتَ شَيْئًا إِمْرًا . قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُلْ إِنَّكَ لَن تَسْتَطِيعَ مَعِيَ صَبْرًا . قَالَ لَا تُؤَاخِذْنِي بِمَا نَسِيتُ وَلَا تُرْهِقْنِي مِنْ أَمْرِي عُسْرًا . فَانْطَلَقَا حَتَّى إِذَا لَقِيَا غُلَامًا فَقَتَلَهُ قَالَ أَقْتَلْتَنِي نَفْسًا زَكِيَّةً بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ لَقَدْ جِئْتَ شَيْئًا نُكْرًا . قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُلْ إِنَّكَ لَن تَسْتَطِيعَ مَعِيَ صَبْرًا . قَالَ إِن سَأَلْتُكَ عَنْ شَيْءٍ بَعْدَهَا فَلَا تُصَاحِبْنِي قَدْ بَلَغْتَ مِنْ لَدُنِّي عُذْرًا . فَانْطَلَقَا حَتَّى إِذَا أَتَيَا أَهْلَ قَرْيَةٍ اسْتَطَعَمَا أَهْلُهَا فَأَبَوْا أَنْ يُضَيِّفُوهُمَا فَوَجَدَا فِيهَا جِدَارًا يُرِيدُ أَنْ يَنْقَضَ فَأَقَامَهُ قَالَ لَوْ شِئْتَ لَاتَّخَذْتَ عَلَيْهِ أَجْرًا . قَالَ هَذَا فِرَاقُ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكَ سَأُنَبِّئُكَ بِتَأْوِيلِ مَا لَمْ تَسْتَطِعْ عَلَيْهِ صَبْرًا . أَمَّا السَّفِينَةُ فَكَانَتْ لِمَسَاكِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ فِي الْبَحْرِ فَأَرَدْتُ أَنْ أَعِيبَهَا وَكَانَ وَرَاءَهُمْ مَلِكٌ يَأْخُذُ كُلَّ سَفِينَةٍ غَصْبًا . وَأَمَّا الْغُلَامُ فَكَانَ أَبَوَاهُ مُؤْمِنَيْنِ فَخَشِينَا أَنْ يُرْهِقَهُمَا طُغْيَانًا وَكُفْرًا . فَأَرَدْنَا أَنْ يُبْدِلَهُمَا رَبُّهُمَا خَيْرًا مِّنْهُ زَكَاةً وَأَقْرَبَ رُحْمًا . وَأَمَّا الْجِدَارُ فَكَانَ لِغُلَامَيْنِ يَتِيمَيْنِ فِي الْمَدِينَةِ وَكَانَ تَحْتَهُ كَنْزٌ لَهُمَا وَكَانَ أَبُوهُمَا صَالِحًا فَأَرَادَ رَبُّكَ أَنْ يَبْلُغَا أَشُدَّهُمَا وَيَسْتَخْرِجَا كَنْزَهُمَا رَحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ وَمَا فَعَلْتُهُ عَنْ أَمْرِي ذَلِكَ تَأْوِيلُ مَا لَمْ تَسْطِعْ عَلَيْهِ صَبْرًا)

Then found they one of Our slaves, unto whom We had given mercy from Us, and had taught him knowledge from Our presence. Moses said unto him: May I follow thee, to the end that thou mayst teach me right conduct of that which thou hast been taught? He said: Lo! thou canst not bear with me. How canst thou bear with that whereof thou canst not compass any knowledge? He said: Allah willing, thou shalt find me patient and I shall not in aught gainsay thee. He said: Well, if thou go with me, ask me not concerning aught till I myself make mention of it unto thee. So they twain set out till, when they were in the ship, he made a hole therein. (Moses) said: Hast thou made a hole therein to drown the folk thereof? Thou verily hast done a dreadful thing. He said: Did I not tell thee that thou couldst not bear with me? (Moses) said: Be not wroth with me that I forgot, and be not hard upon me for my fault. So they twain journeyed on till, when they met a lad, he slew him. (Moses) said: What! Hast thou slain an innocent soul who hath slain no man? Verily thou hast done a horrid thing. He said: Did I not tell thee that thou couldst not bear with me? (Moses) said: If I ask thee after this concerning aught, keep not company with me. Thou hast received an excuse from me. So they twain journeyed on till, when they came unto the folk of a certain township, they asked its folk for food, but they refused to make them guests. And they found therein a wall upon the point of falling into ruin, and he repaired it. (Moses) said: If thou hadst wished, thou couldst have taken payment for it. He said: This is the parting between thee and me! I will announce unto thee the interpretation of that thou couldst not bear with patience. As for the ship, it belonged to poor people working on the river, and I wished to mar it, for there was a king behind them who is taking every ship by force. And as for the lad, his parents were believers and we feared lest he should oppress them by rebellion and disbelief. And we intended that their Lord should change him for them for one better in purity and nearer to mercy. And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the city, and there was beneath it a treasure belonging to them, and their father had been righteous, and thy Lord intended that they should come to their full strength and should bring forth their treasure as a mercy from their Lord; and I did it not upon my own command. Such is the interpretation of that wherewith thou couldst not bear. (Qur'an 18:65-82)

Any person who reads these Verses can easily discern the following points:

1. Musa (Alayhi Salaam) was fully aware that Khidr was more knowledgeable than himself and that Khidr occupied a position higher than his own as far as this trip was concerned, as is obvious from Musa's (Alayhi Salaam) statements such as:

- "May I follow thee, to the end that thou mayst teach me right conduct of that which thou hast been taught?"
- "Allah willing, thou shalt find me patient and I shall not in aught gainsay thee."
- "(Moses) said: Be not wroth with me that I forgot, and be not hard upon me for my fault."
- "(Moses) said: If I ask thee after this concerning aught, keep not company with me. Thou hast received an excuse from me."

2. By the same token, Khidr knew that his position in terms of knowledge was higher than Musa's (Alayhi Salaam). The following statements from the part of Khidr are a testimony to this fact:

- "He said: Lo! thou canst not bear with me. How canst thou bear with that whereof thou canst not compass any knowledge?"
- "He said: Did I not tell thee that thou couldst not bear with me? (twice Khidr says this, with slight difference in the original Arabic)."

The Sunni commentaries clearly relate this difference in levels of knowledge. For example, part of Ibn Kathir's Tafseer in this respect says:

Musa got up to deliver a speech before the Children of Israel and he was asked, "Who is the most learned person among the people" Musa replied, "I am." Allah rebuked him because he did not refer the knowledge to Allah. So Allah revealed to him: "At the junction of the two seas there is a servant of Ours who is more learned than you."...[118]

The Shia interpretation given for this series of Ayahs by Ayatullah Mahdi Puya states:

In these verses the Qur'an describes the meeting which took place between Musa and a chosen servant of Allah, whose name, as per Islamic traditions, was Khizr. Allah told Musa that if he wanted to see a more knowledgeable person then he should go to meet him at the place where the two seas come together...

Musa was the most learned man of his times, but even his wisdom did not comprehend everything. Therefore he was commanded by Allah to go in search of Khizr who would impart to him such knowledge as even he did not possess...

...Verses 66 to 77 describe the actions of Khizr, during their onward journey, which baffled Musa and forced him to question Khizr in spite of the warning Khizr gave to him in the beginning that he would not be able to bear patiently with the events he could not comprehend. In verses 79 to 82 Khizr explains to Musa the interpretation of his actions which he could not bear with patience...[119]

In synthesis, this story goes against the Shia concept of Imamah in its entirety. Thus, it can be said with certainty: Musa (Alayhi Salaam) did not fulfil the conditions of Imamah as laid by Imami Shiaism on account of not being the most knowledgeable person on Earth. Musa (Alayhi Salaam) can be considered as a leader in a general sense, but in the specifics of "Infallible Imamah" there is no manner that he can be included in this category, based on the conclusions reached from the above story.

Musa (Alayhi Salaam), Harun (Alayhi Salaam) and the deviation of the Israelites

Another story that shakes the foundation of Imamah is the incident involving the deviation of the Children of Israel while Musa (Alayhi Salaam) had gone to the Mount at the command of Allah. The Qur'an says in this respect:

(قَالَ يَا هَارُونُ مَا مَنَعَكَ إِذْ رَأَيْتَهُمْ ضَلُّوا . أَلَا تَتَّبِعُنَ أَفْعَصَيْتَ أَمْرِي . قَالَ يَا ابْنَ أُمِّ لَآ تَأْخُذْ بِلِحَيَّتِي وَلَا بِرَأْسِي إِنِّي خَشِيتُ أَنْ تَقُولَ فَرَّقْتَ بَيْنَ بَنِي إِسْرَآئِيلَ وَلَمْ تَرْقُبْ قَوْلِي)

He (Moses) said: O Aaron! What held thee back when thou didst see them gone astray, That thou followedst me not? Hast thou then disobeyed my order? He said: O son of my mother! Clutch not my beard nor my head! I feared lest thou shouldst say: Thou hast caused division among the Children of Israel, and hast not waited for my word. (Qur'an 20:83-94)

After his return, Musa (Alayhi Salaam) was upset and angry at the Israelites deviation. Musa (Alayhi Salaam) wondered whether Harun (Alayhi Salaam) was being disobedient to Musa and let the Israelites in their error. Only after Harun's (Alayhi Salaam) answer is it seen that Musa understood that this had not been the case, and started to look into the matter in a different light. If Musa (Alayhi Salaam) was the "Infallible Imam", it is strange that he would not know that Harun (Alayhi Salaam) had really tried to prevent the people from doing the sins they committed during Musa's absence. In this case, not only was Harun's (Alayhi Salaam) knowledge of the true situation greater than Musa's (Alayhi Salaam), but even the Israelites who had committed the acts of idolatry knew what had actually happened in this respect.

Thus, it is obvious again that Musa (Alayhi Salaam) could not have possibly been the "Imam" during this time. It should be noted that I am not criticizing Musa (Alayhi Salaam) in any manner, but it is appropriate to see how some of the incidents in the lives of people presumed to be "Imams" by the Shias do not match with the theories of Imamah in Shiaism.

The case of Dawud, Sulayman and the sheep

Another case where the supposed "Infallible Imam" is clearly not the wisest is directly derived from the following Verse in the Qur'an:

(وَدَاوُدَ وَسُلَيْمَانَ إِذْ يَحْكُمَانِ فِي الْحَرْثِ إِذْ نَفَسَتْ فِيهِ غَنَمُ الْقَوْمِ وَكُنَّا لِحُكْمِهِمْ شَاهِدِينَ . فَفَهَّمْنَاهَا سُلَيْمَانَ وَكُلًّا آتَيْنَا حُكْمًا وَعِلْمًا وَسَخَّرْنَا مَعَ دَاوُدَ الْجِبَالَ يُسَبِّحْنَ وَالطَّيْرَ وَكُنَّا فَاعِلِينَ)

And remember David and Solomon, when they gave judgment in the matter of the field into which the sheep of certain people had strayed by night: We did witness their judgment. To Solomon We inspired the (right) understanding of the matter: to each (of them) We gave Judgment and Knowledge; it was Our power that made the hills and the birds celebrate Our praises, with David: it was We Who did (all these things). (Qur'an 21:78-79)

It might seem as an inconsequential issue, but the Verse and the commentaries in this respect cast doubts about the doctrine of "Imamah". For example, the Puya/Ali commentary gives the following interpretation for these Verses:

It is reported that a flock of sheep, on account of the negligence of John the shepherd, got into the cultivated field of Elia by night and ate up the plants and fruits. Both of them came to prophet Dawud for equitable settlement. Dawud awarded Elia, the owner of the cultivated field, the flock of sheep belonging to John in compensation for the loss he suffered. Prophet Sulayman son of Dawud was a mere boy of eleven, but he thought of a better decision, where the penalty would better fit the offence. Sulayman's suggestion was that John should cultivate Elia's field and return it to Elia when it was fully restored to the condition before eaten up by his herd; and in the meantime Elia should take possession of John's sheep and use only their milk and wool and return them to John when he gave him back his field duly cultivated. This is because Allah is present every where and having witnessed the whole affair He inspired Sulayman to arrive at the true judgement. As prophets of Allah neither spoke nor acted except as directed by Allah both the decisions were announced as inspired by Allah. The decision of Dawud was based upon the law current at that time. Dawud had many sons. It was Allah's will that Sulayman should be given the prophethood. So after this case in which the young Sulayman was inspired to announce a new judgement, superseding the current law, Dawud, under Allah's command, made Sulayman his heir, and after Dawud, Sulayman was appointed by Allah as His prophet.[120]

Similarly, the commentary by Ayatullah Makarem Shirazi says that while both judgments were just: "Any how, that of Solomon was preferred over the judgement of his father." [121]

The Sunni commentaries also voice this same line of thinking. The Tafseer by Ibn Kather notes:

"Grapes which had grown and their bunches were spoiled by the sheep. Dawud (David) ruled that the owner of the grapes should keep the sheep. Sulayman (Solomon) said, 'Not like this, O Prophet of Allah!' [Dawud] said, 'How then' [Sulayman] said: 'Give the grapes to the owner of the sheep and let him tend them until they grow back as they were, and give the sheep to the owner of the grapes and let him benefit from them until the grapes have grown back as they were. Then the grapes should be given back to their owner, and the sheep should be given back to their owner.' [122]

From all these opinions, the following points come to the front in this respect:

1. According to Shia ideology, Dawud (Alayhi Salaam) would have been the "Infallible Imam" of his time. How is it possible that he did not know that the appropriate true ruling would involve a new judgement?
2. How could Sulayman (Alayhi Salaam) supersede his father (the Infallible Imam of the time), while Sulayman had not yet become the "Imam of the time"?

It should be noted that I am not saying Dawud's (Alayhi Salaam) judgement was incorrect. Sulayman's (Alayhi Salaam) decision was better suited to the situation, as evidenced by the text of the Qur'an and the accompanying commentaries. However, given the specific qualities that any Imam should possess at any time, this situation is self-contradictory and inconsistent. Therefore, the only possible conclusion is that Infallible Imamah did not exist during Dawud's (Alayhi Salaam) time either.

The case of Zakariya (Alayhi Salaam) and the Birth of Yahya (Alayhi Salaam)

The story of Prophet Zakariya (Alayhi Salaam) and the miraculous birth of his son Yahya (Alayhi Salaam) is further proof of the shaky nature behind the doctrine of Imamah. We are supposing again that Zakariyah (Alayhi Salaam) is the "Imam of his time" among the children of Israel, since there is no evidence of there being any other Prophets or Leaders among the Israelites during this time, nor have the Shias made any comments contrary to this hypothesis.

The specific story of Zakariyah (Alayhi Salaam) is mentioned in the Qur'an twice in detail. For example, In Surah Maryam (Chapter 19) Allah says:

(ذِكْرُ رَحْمَةِ رَبِّكَ عَبْدَهُ زَكَرِيَّا . إِذْ نَادَى رَبَّهُ نِدَاءً خَفِيًّا . قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي وَهَنَ الْعَظْمُ مِنِّي وَاشْتَعَلَ الرَّأْسُ شَيْبًا وَلَمْ أَكُنْ بِدُعَائِكَ رَبِّ شَقِيًّا . وَإِنِّي خِفْتُ الْمَوَالِيَ مِنْ وَرَائِي وَكَانَتِ امْرَأَتِي عَاقِرًا فَهَبْ لِي مِنْ لَدُنْكَ وَلِيًّا . يَرِثُنِي وَيَرِثْ مِنْ آلِ يَعْقُوبَ وَاجْعَلْهُ رَبِّ رَضِيًّا)

A mention of the mercy of thy Lord unto His servant Zachariah. When he cried unto his Lord a cry in secret, Saying: My Lord! Lo! the bones of me wax feeble and my head is shining with grey hair, and I have never been unblest in prayer to Thee, my Lord. Lo! I fear my kinsfolk after me, since my wife is barren. Oh, give me from Thy presence a successor. Who shall inherit of me and inherit (also) of the house of Jacob. And make him, my Lord, acceptable (unto Thee). (It was said unto him): O Zachariah! Lo! We bring thee tidings of a son whose name is John; we have given the same name to none before (him). He said: My Lord! How can I have a son when my wife is barren and I have reached infirm old age? He said: So (it will be). Thy Lord saith: It is easy for Me, even as I created thee before, when thou wast naught. (Qur'an 19:2-6)

In this case, it is beyond doubt that Zakariya (Alayhi Salaam) himself is unaware of who was to succeed him in Prophethood (or Imamah in the case of Shia reasoning) until he prayed to Allah and the angels gave him the glad tidings of Yahya (Alayhi Salaam). Still, even after this declaration from the angels, Zakariya (Alayhi Salaam) needed further reassurances that this news was indeed true.

While this great Prophet is not doing anything contrary to the principles of Prophethood in Sunnism, if seen from a Shia viewpoint, it would seem out of place for Zakariya not to be aware as to who the “next Imam” would be, and that the future “Imam” would be none other than his own son. Additionally, his prayer to Allah raises all sorts of question marks, since it shows that Zakariyah (Alayhi Salaam) earnestly did not know whether there would be a successor to him after his death, let alone from his progeny. Considering the supposed continuity of Imamah since the beginning of time, along with the many years Zakariyah (Alayhi Salaam) had supposedly held the post of Infallible Imam, the two incongruencies described above are alarming to say the very least. Thus, it can be concluded that Zakariyah does not fulfil the conditions of an Imam as laid out by Shiism. As a matter of fact, his actions cause us to doubt even more the divine nature behind the post of Imamah as presented by the Shia.

General Problem Five: Prophecies and Imams?

Sometimes Shias quote passages from the Old Testament of the Bible and interpret them to mean that the “12 Imams” had been foretold from the time of previous Prophets. Nonetheless, these passages cannot be taken as evidence by the Muslim due to the corruption that has taken place in the Bible throughout the centuries.

What we can take as evidence is the word of the Qur'an. Indeed, there are places in the Qur'an where the coming of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) has been mentioned among the previous Prophets and Scriptures, either by an invocation or a directive from the Prophet or Holy Book. It is interesting to note that in all these cases there is absolutely no mention of any divinely appointed figures to come after him. Looking at each specific case, the startling lack of basis for the Imamah doctrine (as far as the “12 Imams” are concerned) comes into light.

Ibrahim and the Dua for the Prophet to come in Land of Makkah

Reading further after Ayah 2:124, a story is presented that is at the very least puzzling when considering the totality of Shia beliefs with respect to Imamah after Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam):

(رَبَّنَا وَابْعَثْ فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِّنْهُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِكَ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ)

Lord! And raise up in their midst a messenger from among them who shall recite unto them Thy revelations, and shall instruct them in the Scripture and in wisdom and shall make them grow. Lo! Thou, only Thou, art the Mighty, Wise. (Qur'an 2:129)

This Verse is sometimes explained by the Shia as Ibrahim's (Alayhi Salaam) specific prayer for the land of Makkah, while Ayah 2:124 was the one for Imamah in general. However, it seems unbelievable that Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) and Ismail (Alayhi Salaam) would earnestly pray to Allah for a Prophet to come from among the people of Makkah, but would not mention the 12 Imams of the Shia religion to rise up from among the line of the Prophet. This is especially perplexing considering that Ali was born in Makkah, and according to the Shia narratives, in the same Holy House (i.e. the Ka'aba) that Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) and Ismail (Alayhi Salaam) were building many centuries back. In addition, this prayer from Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) and Ismail (Alayhi Salaam) seems awkward in not mentioning the Imams, when, in addition to Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam), the 12 Imams are the best Leaders the Universe has ever seen.

Finally, it must be remembered that according to the Shia view, Ismail (Alayhi Salaam) had absolutely no Divinely appointed heritage before the coming of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) and the "12 Imams". How is it possible that Ismail (Alayhi Salaam) would allude to one of his future offspring who would occupy a high rank and position (i.e. Prophet Muhammad, Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) while being completely silent about the other "Divine Imams" who would represent Islam until the Day of Judgement?

Isa (Alayhi Salaam) and the coming of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam)

Another narrative about the coming of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) comes from the mouth of Prophet Isa (Alayhi Salaam), when he says:

(وَإِذْ قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ يَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ مُّصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيَّ مِنَ التَّوْرَةِ وَمُبَشِّرًا بِرَسُولٍ يَأْتِي مِنْ بَعْدِي اسْمُهُ أَحْمَدُ)

And (remember) when 'Iesa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary), said: "O Children of Israel! I am the Messenger of Allah unto you confirming the Taurat [(Torah) which came] before me, and giving glad tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmed. (Qur'an 61:6)

Again, this raises the same questions as the situation of Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam) and Ismail (Alayhi Salaam). Why would Isa (Alayhi Salaam) be so specific when declaring his prophecy to the point of even mentioning one of the names of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam), while he says nothing about any of the "Imams" that would come after Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam)?

Another issue that seems strange (and that was discussed in brief above) is that Isa (Alayhi Salaam) does not say in this Verse nor in any other places about which "Infallible Imam" the believing Israelites would need to follow immediately after his departure. As a result, the mention of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) as a Prophet after Isa (Alayhi Salaam) is made, but no mention is made of "Imams" after Isa (Alayhi Salaam) or of "Imams" after Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). All this is further proof that the ideology of Imamah is not based on the Holy Qur'an.

The Unlettered Prophet

The Qur'an also relates about how the Jewish and Christian peoples had been foretold about the coming of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). Allah says in the Qur'an:

(الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ الْأُمِّيَّ الَّذِي يَجِدُونَهُ مَكْنُوبًا عِنْدَهُمْ فِي التَّوْرَةِ
وَالْإِنْجِيلِ يَأْمُرُهُمْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَاهُمْ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُحِلُّ لَهُمُ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَيُحَرِّمُ
عَلَيْهِمُ الْخَبَائِثَ وَيَضَعُ عَنْهُمْ إِصْرَهُمْ وَالْأَغْلَالَ الَّتِي كَانَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ فَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِهِ
وَعَزَّزُوا وَتَصَرُّوهُ وَاتَّبَعُوا التَّوْرَ الَّذِي أُنْزِلَ مَعَهُ أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ)

Those who follow the Messenger-Prophet, the Ummi, whom they find written down with them in the Taurat and the Injeel (who) enjoins them good and forbids them evil, and makes lawful to them the good things and makes unlawful to them impure things, and removes from them their burden and the shackles which were upon them; so (as for) those who believe in him and honor him and help him, and follow the light which has been sent down with him, these it is that are the successful. (Qur'an 7:157)

It is evident from the above Verse that the Qur'an maintains that Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) was prophesized in the Holy Scriptures such as the Torah and the Injeel. Certainly, the only reliable evidence we have about what the Torah and the Injeel said in their uncorrupted form is what the Qur'an states about these revelations. It is truly remarkable to note that while the prophecies dealing with the coming of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) are clearly spelled out for all humans to read, there is no word whatsoever about other Divine representatives or "Infallible Imams" who would come after Muhammad's (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) demise.

The real reason for the discrepancies and problems with the "Imamah" of these Prophets is that the Shias themselves do not have specific texts confirming when these Prophets became "Imams", or even that these Prophets in fact were "Imams". It is more a matter of guessing and working backwards, trying to corral certain individuals into specific positions in order to keep the doctrine afloat. However, Allah says:

(وَإِنَّ الظَّنَّ لَا يُغْنِي مِنَ الْحَقِّ شَيْئًا)

lo! a guess can never take the place of the truth. (Qur'an 53:28)

It was clear from looking into the consequences of some Qur'anic Verses that the "Imamah" of some of the Prophets is nothing but a guess, a guess that is readily revealed as such by the careful observer.

Given these Ayahs of the Qur'an, and the continued issues that kept on rising to the surface time and time again, I was bound to ask myself one more time: Is it merely a case of Allah deciding not to put this in the Qur'an for mysterious reasons, or is it not in the Qur'an because such "Infallible Imams" simply do not exist as such? As the honest researcher will have come to know, the second option is the one closer to Islam.

MUHAMMAD (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) AS "IMAM"?

It has been noted that the belief in Imamah stands on very weak foundations once the Qur'an is opened and compared with the Shia ideologies. Another issue of utmost importance in this discussion is this section, which tries to discover whether Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) who is accepted as both a Nabi and a Rasool (Prophet and Messenger) by Sunnis and Shias, holds the special and specific type of Imamah Shias speak of, in light of the Qur'anic Verses. The non-existence of "Imamah" among many of

the Prophets whom the Shias contend to be Imams was discussed, but the case of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) is of special significance.

Shia ideology states that the highest position Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) occupied was in his role as an Imam, and not as a Prophet or Messenger (Rasullullah or Nabi-u-llah). Thus, according to the Shia, the highest position ever held by any creation of Allah ever is that of "Imam Muhammad". This is an important idea put forward by many Shias, since it changes everything about the way we look at Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam).

Before going through the question of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) as an "Imam", it is important that we consider the following questions, so that we can realize the obviousness of Muhammad's (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) Prophethood:

- During Muhammad's (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) time, how many Muslims who followed him were unaware that he was a Prophet of Allah?
- During this same time, how many disbelievers and enemies of Islam did not know that Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) was calling himself a Prophet of Allah?
- Even today, is there anyone who knows little about Islam, Muslim or non-Muslim, who does not know that Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) claimed that he was a Prophet of Allah?

The answer to these questions is none. There is not a single person since the advent of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) until now who has gone through Islam as a religion without realizing that he claimed to be a Prophet and Messenger of Allah.

However, the case with Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) as an "Infallible Imam" is quite different. Some people may say that it is intuitively obvious that Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) was the Infallible Imam of the Muslim Ummah. This is a completely wrong statement, and is stated by those who think that everyone has Imamah as part of their belief system. The reality is that so-called "intuitive concepts" vary from nation to nation, so that what seems to be obvious for one religious group is completely rejected by another. If belief was truly as intuitive as Muslims see things, there would not be a single person on this earth who would believe that God can incarnate in the form of a human. As it stands, though, more than half of the world's population believes in the theory of divine incarnation into a human body, something that is readily rejected by the Muslim mind.

So it is seen that religion is a matter of revelation, not intuitiveness or deep meditation. We as Muslims know of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) as the leader of all Muslims from his time up to the Day of Resurrection. But the specifics of his "Infallible Imamah" are very sketchy even according to the Shia side. The dogma of Imamah according to Shiaism is too complex for all Muslims to come to this conclusion based on common sense alone.

What is perhaps even more amazing is that while almost all Shia propaganda focuses on showing Ali and his progeny as Imams, millions of ordinary Shias live and die with the misconception that Imamah did not exist prior to the death of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). This is the consequence of the Shias constantly mentioning the "12 Imams" as Imams, while largely neglecting Muhammad's (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) role as "Imam". Even the alternate name of the Imamiyah sect is the Ithna Ashariyah (the Twelvers), a connotation that further blurs Muhammad's (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) supposed position as Imam. Notwithstanding, the top ranks of Shia scholars hold Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) to be an "Imam", in the same way Ibrahim (Alayhi Salaam), Musa (Alayhi Salaam), Isa (Alayhi Salaam) are "Imams", so the only reason why Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) is held as an "Imam" in the traditional scholarly Shia explanations of religion is to maintain the theory of "Prophet-Imams".

How was Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) addressed?

It is of extreme importance to note that when any dignitary or official in this world is addressed, he/she is referred to by the highest rank that he/she occupies. For example, it is obvious that George W. Bush is a politician and leader of the Republican Party in the United States. However, he is never addressed as "Politician Bush" by anyone, but always as The President of the United States George W. Bush, or as President Bush. The same overall principle can be seen when talking of "President" General Musharraf of Pakistan, "Prime Minister" Gordon Brown of Great Britain, and so on with all of the world's leaders.

Even among religious scholars and leaders, they are referred to by the highest position they occupy. For example, John Paul II was a Cardinal and a Bishop of the Catholic religion, but he was referred to each and every single time as "Pope John Paul II". In Shiaism as well, the Grand Ayatullahs have passed through the positions of Mubaligh, Hujattul Islam, and Ayatullah, but they are always referred to as "Grand Ayatullah" (Ayatullah al-Uzma) by their peers and followers. If anyone has had experience with close followers of these scholars, they will know that referring to Sistani (for example) as a Hujattul Islam will draw very heavy criticism from his followers, as they consider it to be a tremendous insult to the rank he has achieved.

Given this criteria, it is remarkable to note that the Holy Qur'an never addresses Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) as "Oh Imam" or "This Imam". None of the places where Allah uses the word "Imam" directly refers to Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). Even when there is a possibility for the Verse to refer to Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) such as in Ayah 36:12, some of the Shia commentaries instead try to present the Verse as referring to Ali instead of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam).

In view of this fact, I believe it is extremely important for us to see how Allah does refer to Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) directly in the Qur'an, whether it is when his name is mentioned, or in other instances.

Muhammad referred to by name, any hint of him being an Imam?

There are five places in the Qur'an where the Prophet (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) is referred to by name. Four of them are by the name Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam), while the other is by Ahmad. A brief look at them will show that while Allah explicitly says that Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) is indeed His Rasul and Nabi, none of them mention him as an Imam or anything even similar to that. Thus, Allah says:

(وَمَا مُحَمَّدٌ إِلَّا رَسُولٌ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ الرُّسُلُ)

Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) is no more than a Messenger, and indeed (many) Messengers have passed away before him. (Qur'an 3:144)

(مَا كَانَ مُحَمَّدٌ أَبَا أَحَدٍ مِّن رِّجَالِكُمْ وَلَكِن رَّسُولَ اللَّهِ وَخَاتَمَ النَّبِيِّينَ)

Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) is not the father of any man among you, but he is the Messenger of Allah and the last (end) of the Prophets (Qur'an 33:40)

(وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَآمَنُوا بِمَا نُزِّلَ عَلَى مُحَمَّدٍ وَهُوَ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ كَفَّرَ عَنْهُمْ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ وَأَصْلَحَ بَالَهُمْ)

But those who believe and do righteous good deeds, and believe in that which is sent down to Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam), for it is the truth from their Lord, He will expiate from them their sins, and will make good their state. (Qur'an 47:2)

(مُحَمَّدٌ رَّسُولُ اللَّهِ)

Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) is the Messenger of Allah (Qur'an 48:29)

(وَإِذْ قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ يَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيَّ مِنَ التَّوْرَةِ وَمُبَشِّرًا بِرَسُولٍ يَأْتِي مِنْ بَعْدِي اسْمُهُ أَحْمَدُ)

And (remember) when 'Iesa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary), said: "O Children of Israel! I am the Messenger of Allah unto you confirming the Taurat [(Torah) which came] before me, and giving glad tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmed. (Qur'an 61:6)

By reading these Verses of the Qur'an, one can immediately gather that Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) is a Prophet of Allah (Rasullulah) and a Nabi. It will not require a specialized commentary for any Muslim to understand that in these Verses Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) is being called a Prophet of Allah. Even a non-Muslim completely opposed to Islam would accept that Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) is referred to as a Prophet and Messenger of Allah in the Qur'an, even though he/she will not accept his Prophethood.

However, none of the Verses above even remotely refers to Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) as an Imam. Among Shia scholars as well, none of them has attempted to show that these Ayats refer to Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) as an Imam, since the text of the Qur'an is overwhelmingly clear in this respect.

“Oh Imam”?

Another issue that should be tackled concerns how Allah addresses Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) in various parts of the Qur'an. There are certain times in the Qur'an when Allah directly addresses Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam), in order to give him a directive, or to advise him on how to deal with certain groups of people, etc. While Allah does refer to Muhammad by the words “O Messenger” and “O Prophet”, not once is the phrase “O Imam” or even “O Leader” being used to refer to Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam).

Thus, the phrase “Yaa Ayuhaa Nabi” (O Prophet):

(يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ)

Is used in the following Verses of the Qur'an: 8:64, 8:65, 8:70, 9:73, 33:1, 33:28, 33:45, 33:50, 33:59, 60:12, 65:1, and 66:1.

In a similar manner the phrase “Yaa Ayuhaa Rasuul” (O Messenger):

(يَا أَيُّهَا الرَّسُولُ)

is used in Verses 5:41 and 5:67.

The Verses presented above are not the only times when the Qur'an speaks about Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) specifically. There are a multitude of Verses in the Qur'an where the reader will undoubtedly notice that Allah is referring to Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) as His Prophet and/or Messenger. The total number of these instances approaches 200 (Muhammad as a Prophet about 170

times, and Muhammad as Nabi about 30 times). As an example, in Surah At-Tawbah (Chapter 9) alone, it can be seen in 33 separate instances that the “Rasool” being referred to is Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam), as well as 2 more referring to him as the “Nabi”. All scholars have agreed without much argument that in all these instances, the “Rasool” or “Nabi” being referred to is indeed Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam).

Considering the following passage from the Qur’an where a number of Muhammad’s (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) attributes have been mentioned, a reference to Muhammad’s (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) “Imamah” cannot be observed either. For example, the Qur’an states:

(يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ شَاهِدًا وَمُبَشِّرًا وَنَذِيرًا . وَدَاعِيًا إِلَى اللَّهِ بِإِذْنِهِ
وَسِرَاجًا مُنِيرًا . وَبَشِّرِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ بِأَنَّ لَهُم مِّنَ اللَّهِ فَضْلًا كَبِيرًا)

O Prophet! Lo! We have sent thee as a witness and a bringer of good tidings and a warner. And as a summoner unto Allah by His permission, and as a lamp that giveth light. (Qur’an 33:45-46)

None of these attributes and titles of the Prophet (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) either by themselves or as a group can be taken to mean he was an “Imam” as understood by the Shias. For example, it can be derived that being a “Nadhir” and “Bashir” are some of the primary functions of a Prophet and alternative ways for Allah to call them (such is the case with many Ayahs of the Qur’an, such as Verse 4:165 which was shown before). Being a “summoner who calls towards Allah” or a “lamp that gives light” are also not qualities that would be unique to “Imams” even according to the Shia faith.

Perhaps the only title that may remotely be connected to “Imam” is “Witness” (Shaahid). Looking at the Qur’an, though, it is obvious that the Muslims as a whole have this task of being witnesses (in this case, witnesses over humanity)[123]. Allah says in the Qur’an:

(يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا ارْكَعُوا وَاسْجُدُوا وَاعْبُدُوا رَبَّكُمْ وَافْعَلُوا الْخَيْرَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ .

وَجَاهِدُوا فِي اللَّهِ حَقَّ جِهَادِهِ هُوَ اجْتَبَاكُمْ وَمَا جَعَلَ عَلَيْكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ مِنْ حَرَجٍ مِّلَّةَ
أَبِيكُمْ إِبْرَاهِيمَ هُوَ سَمَّاكُمُ الْمُسْلِمِينَ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَفِي هَذَا لِيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ شَهِيدًا عَلَيْكُمْ
وَتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ فَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتُوا الزَّكَاةَ وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِاللَّهِ هُوَ
مَوْلَاكُمْ فَنِعْمَ الْمَوْلَى وَنِعْمَ النَّصِيرُ)

O ye who believe! Bow down and prostrate yourselves, and worship your Lord, and do good, that haply ye may prosper. And strive for Allah with the endeavour which is His right. He hath chosen you and hath not laid upon you in religion any hardship; the faith of your father Abraham (is yours). He hath named you Muslims of old time and in this (Scripture), that the messenger may be a witness against you, and that ye may be witnesses against mankind. So establish worship, pay the poor-due, and hold fast to Allah. He is your Protecting friend. A blessed Patron and a blessed Helper! (Qur’an 22:77-78)

Therefore, nowhere in the Qur’an is Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) referred to as an “Imam” either in a direct or indirect manner. The contrast between Muhammad’s (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) supposed position and the treatment of this “rank” in the Qur’an is staggering and cannot be overlooked by anyone seeking to discover the true nature of “Imamah”.

People of the Book, the coming of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam), and Imamah?

In the previous section the confusion of the Shias with respect to the “succession of Imams” between Isa (Alayhi Salaam) and Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) was discussed. It was also seen that between the times of Musa (Alayhi Salaam) and Isa (Alayhi Salaam) there is more than enough evidence to prove that Imamah as viewed in Shiaism did not exist during this period either.

It is important to note that the Ahl-ul-Kitaab (People of the Book) were a people who have been addressed particularly in many places of the Qur'an. One of the Ayahs that caught my attention was:

(يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولُنَا يُبَيِّنُ لَكُمْ عَلَى فَتْرَةٍ مِّنَ الرَّسُلِ أَن تَقُولُوا مَا جَاءَنَا مِن بَشِيرٍ وَلَا نَذِيرٍ فَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ بَشِيرٌ وَنَذِيرٌ وَاللَّهُ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ)

People of the Book! Our Messenger has come to you, making things clear to you, after a period with no Messengers, lest you should say, ‘No one came to us bringing good news or warning.’ Someone has come to you bringing good news and a warning. Allah has power over all things. (Qur'an 5:19)

Allah also addresses the People of the Book a few Verses before this, saying:

(يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولُنَا يُبَيِّنُ لَكُمْ كَثِيرًا مِّمَّا كُنْتُمْ تُخْفُونَ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَيَعْفُو عَنْ كَثِيرٍ فَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ نُورٌ وَكِتَابٌ مُبِينٌ)

O People of the Scripture! Now hath Our messenger come unto you, expounding unto you much of that which ye used to hide in the Scripture, and forgiving much. now hath come unto you light from Allah and plain Scripture (Qur'an 5:15)

In both these cases, the Qur'an is talking to the Jews and the Christians, with Allah informing them that a Messenger has come to them after a period wherein there were no Messengers, and that “Now” has the light come unto them.

With respect to the “Imamah doctrine”, the researcher is immediately forced to ask the following questions:

- Why would Allah mention absence of Messengers if the weight of preserving the Message and calling unto Allah actually rests with the Imam?
- Why would Allah say that “now” the light has come to them, if supposedly there was an Infallible Imam (the light from Allah) living among them even before the advent of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam)?

This Ayah refers to the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) as a whole, thus nullifying the possible explanation that certain Christians were following an Imam before the advent of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). This explanation is null, not only because there is no mention of such an “Imam” in the Islamic traditions, but also because the presence or absence of Messengers (i.e. Rasools) is what determines the bringing of good news and warnings to a people (as opposed to the Shia ideology, where the Imams are presented as the upholders of the religion).

From these Verses it can also be concluded that the Jews and Christians did not have the concept of Imamah in their consciousness, and that Allah did not reprimand them for it. This is of extreme consequence, since Allah brings the Jews and Christians to account and reprimands them for a whole array of wrong deeds and unjustified inventions they had been steeped into before the coming of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). Yet, their "neglect of Imamah" is never mentioned anywhere in the Qur'an, either directly or indirectly.

For those readers who may be unfamiliar with the various actions the Jews and Christians of the past and present are blamed for in the Qur'an, the following sins can be given as examples:

- Killing the Prophets without just cause by the Jews (Verses 2:60, 3:21)
- Breaking the treaty taken from them on the Mount by the Jews (Verse 2:83-84). This treaty included worshipping Allah, being good to parents, kindred, orphans and the needy, establishing Salah, giving Zakah.
- Exaggerating the position of Isa (Alayhi Salaam) by the Christians and equating him with God (Verses 5:17, 5:73)
- Taking the priests and rabbis as Lords in place of Allah by both Jews and Christians (Verse 9:31).
- The Israelites asking Musa (Alayhi Salaam) to give them an idol-god similar to the one of a nation they passed (Verses 7:138-141)

Of course, there are many more Verses where the misdeeds of the Jews and Christians are mentioned. Only a small portion of them has been mentioned here, since the total number of Verses mentioning their stories runs into the triple digits. But Allah never blames or reprimands the People of the Book for "failing to follow the Divinely Appointed Imam". It is truly amazing that the Qur'an goes to great lengths to recount very specific instances of the sins the Jews and Christians had fallen into, stories that may have been forgotten over the centuries before the coming of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). Yet when it comes to the supposedly more important issue of not following the "proper Imam" the Qur'an says absolutely nothing about it.

If the characteristics of the sincere followers from among the People of the Book were to be enumerated, it would be obvious that "belief in Imamah" was not a part of their required faith. For example, the Qur'an says:

اللَّيْلِ وَهُمْ يَسْجُدُونَ لَيْسُوا سِوَاءَ مَنْ أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ أُمَّةٌ قَائِمَةٌ يَتْلُونَ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ آنَاءَ
يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ .
وَمَا يَفْعَلُوا مِنْ خَيْرٍ فَلَنْ يُبْسَرَ عُنْ فِي الْخَيْرَاتِ وَأُولَئِكَ مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ
لَيْمٌ بِالْمُتَّقِينَ يُكْفَرُوهُ وَاللَّهُ ع

They are not all alike. Of the People of the Scripture there is a staunch community who recite the revelations of Allah in the night season, falling prostrate (before Him). They believe in Allah and the Last Day, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency, and vie one with another in good works. These are of the righteous. And whatever good they do, they will not be denied the meed thereof. Allah is Aware of those who ward off (evil). (Qur'an 3:113-115)

It is seen here that the good people from among the Jews and Christians were not good because they "followed the correct Infallible Imams" of their time. Rather, their beliefs and practices are very close to the general way that Allah wants a Muslim to believe and behave. This includes the belief in Allah and the Last Day, enjoining the good and forbidding the evil. Yet neither in this Verse nor in any other place do are the believing Jews and Christians equated with following a non-Prophet divine representative. (It was already seen in the discussion of Ayahs 28:5 and 32:24 that the "Imams" in those cases could not possibly be Imams as the Shias see it).

Pagans and coming of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam)... as an Imam?

Muhammad's (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) coming was obviously witnessed by the Jews and Christians of his time. However, the main group to which he was initially sent to was the Pagan Arabs. It is noteworthy to point out that there are a number of broad analogies that can be made between the Pagans and the People of the Book in terms of showing that Imamah was never preached to them as a concept. For example, Allah says about the coming of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) to his people:

لِنُنْذِرَ قَوْمًا مَّا أَتَاهُمْ مِّنْ نَّذِيرٍ مِّن قَبْلِكَ أَمْ يَقُولُونَ افْتَرَاهُ بَلْ هُوَ الْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكَ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَهْتَدُونَ

Or say they: He hath invented it? Nay, but it is the Truth from thy Lord, that thou mayst warn a folk to whom no warner came before thee, that haply they may walk aright. (Qur'an 32:3)

and

لِنُنْذِرَ قَوْمًا مَّا أُنْذِرَ آبَاؤُهُمْ فَهُمْ غَافِلُونَ

That thou mayst warn a folk whose fathers were not warned, so they are heedless. (Qur'an 36:6)

It is seen that as in the case with the Jews and the Christians, Allah affirms that the Makkans had no one who had come to them immediately before the coming of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). Other Ayahs of the Qur'an, like Verse 28:49 which was discussed before, point towards the same general idea: The Pagan Arabs had not witnessed the coming of any divine representative immediately before the arrival of the Last Prophet (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam). This is all obviously against the Shia understanding of Imamah, and the Qur'an is very clear and very specific about these issues.

Not explaining Imamah to the Pagans?

The incongruence between the way Imamah is discussed in Shiaism and the way the Qur'an discusses this "doctrine" comes to light most forcefully when looking at the way the Islamic message was delivered to the Pagan Arabs. If the Shia viewpoint is viewed as correct for the sake of argument, the belief of Imamah is not something that the Arab tribes would be expected to know much about. As had been noted before while looking at Ayah 5:19, even the Jews and Christians were at least aware of the weight Messengers (i.e. Rasools) had in calling people to the path of Allah, yet they did not have the notion of Imamah in their vocabulary. Seen from a rational viewpoint, explaining a belief about which the people are completely ignorant about is at the same level as explaining a belief that has been wrongly distorted by the masses.

For example, the Arabs of the Ignorance Period had all sorts of wrong ideas about the nature of Prophets. The Qur'an says:

وَقَالُوا مَالِ هَذَا الرَّسُولِ يَأْكُلُ الطَّعَامَ وَيَمْشِي فِي الْأَسْوَاقِ لَوْلَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْهِ مَلَكٌ
فَيَكُونَ مَعَهُ نَذِيرًا

And they say: What aileth this messenger (of Allah) that he eateth food and walketh in the markets? Why is not an angel sent down unto him, to be a warner with him. (Qur'an 25:7)

Thus, the Pagans imagined that the Messenger to be sent to them should be an angel, since they believed that a mere human could not be sent as a Messenger by Allah. Similar Verses dealing with the same misconception by previous nations are mentioned in other locations, such as Ayah 36:15 and Ayah 54:24. To this, the reply is:

نَ الطَّعَامَ وَيَمْشُونَ فِي الْأَسْوَاقِ وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا قَبْلَكَ مِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ إِلَّا إِنَّهُمْ لَيَأْكُلُوا
وَجَعَلْنَا بَعْضَكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ فِتْنَةً أَتَصْبِرُونَ وَكَانَ رَبُّكَ بَصِيرًا

We never sent before thee any messengers but lo! they verily ate food and walked in the markets. And We have appointed some of you a test for others: Will ye be steadfast? And thy Lord is ever Seer. (Qur'an 25:20)

In addition to this Verse, there are others such as Ayah 21:7-8 and Ayah 6:8-9 that generally give similar rebuttals to the ignorant excuses of the Pagan Arabs when Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) came to them with the Message from Allah.

The important part in our discussion relates to the humanity of Messengers sent to different nations having been mentioned by Allah in the Holy Qur'an. It may be taken as granted by many Muslims today, but there is a considerable chance that an ignorant nation will have conjured up a whole host of ideas about what a Messenger is and what he is not. Such was the case with the Pagan Arabs to whom Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) was sent. The great length the Qur'an goes into in order to state the truth with respect to this false invention is clear for all to see.

The same type of statements may be seen when many of the other false ideas the Pagan Arabs had are considered. This can be seen with respect to a range of issues such as:

Mentioning that Angels are not females begotten by Allah (Verses 37:149-53)

Declaring as false the pagan idea that the jinn and Allah were related by kinship (Verse 37:158)

Stating that the Day of Judgement will come to pass, in spite of the Pagans notion that such an occurrence was merely a conjecture (Verses 45:24-37)

Exposing and correcting the false notions the Pagans had about Cattle (Verses 6:136-144)

Many Muslims reading about the stories of the pagans during the Period of Ignorance may find some of their actions and beliefs hilarious. Nevertheless, there is nothing funny about it at all, since these wrong thoughts were serious enough that Allah mentioned each one of them in the Qur'an. Yet, there is no effort from part of the Qur'an to explain to these people what an Imam is, what are his qualities, how is an Imam tied to every time, why did the Pagans not follow the "true Imams" before the coming of Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam), or that Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) is an Imam. Any reasonable researcher would be amazed at the fact that Allah includes Verses on all the above issues, some of which are supposedly lower than Imamah (and certainly not part of the Usool-e-Din in Shiaism), while Imamah and its pillars are not dealt with in any manner at all.

These issues made me think that the "Imamah of Muhammad" was not based on any strong evidence. It seemed more like a concept artificially added to the Shia thought because of the "Imamah of the 12 Imams". The general ignorance of the Muslim Ummah and most Shias about the Prophet's position as "Imam", coupled with the manner in which the coming of the Prophet (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) is mentioned in the Qur'an cannot allow any other conclusion for the fair-minded truth-seeker.

CONCLUSION

I started my research on the premise that the Qur'an would be the first and most important text that would determine the truth or falsehood of the Imamah doctrine. As I read the Qur'an over and over again, each time looking for different aspects in the lives of previous Prophets and Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam), the explanation of the concepts of Prophethood and "Imamah", and the specific usage of the words from which the dogmas are formed I reached a definite conclusion. I reasoned that there is no way a balanced Muslim could "see Imamah" in the Qur'an the way the Shias have developed this doctrine. Considering the nature of Imamah in Shiaism and the fact that it is an encompassing belief that supersedes Prophethood in almost every aspect, it is difficult to see a strong emphasis being placed on this dogma from the Qur'anic perspective. I saw that there was some mention in the Qur'an of "Imamah" and "Imams" among the nations of the past, though in no way could it be tied to Shia ideology. If the dogma of Imamah was not strongly stressed in the lifetimes of the past Prophets or during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam), it is impossible for this doctrine to come out of the blue after the Prophet's (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) demise.

With this truth established, looking into the "Imamah of the 12 Imams" was redundant, just like looking into the supposed crucifixion of Jesus when it is known that substitutionary punishment is not a Divine Tool of justice. Thus, judging the general legitimacy of the doctrine based on the main Holy Book before moving on to other issues was a proper way to find the truth. I look forward to this methodology being used by all Sunnis and Shias who wish to step out of the normal spiral of unproductive discussions and judge for themselves where the correct faith lies.

While I was preparing this book, I received news that an acquaintance of mine I had known for some months decided to leave Shiaism. Like the brother I mentioned at the beginning of this book, he had read

about Shiaism deeply. In this case, the brother actually entered the fold of Shiaism and started to learn more about his new faith before deciding that Shiaism was not the true form of Islam.

The thing that struck me the most about his case is that he took a lot of time going through the Ahadeeth from both Sunni and Shia sides, and dug deeply into Islamic history and other fields. Indeed, most of his queries into the Sunni and Shia faiths centered on historical events and the sciences of Ahadeeth. However, when he decided to leave Shiaism after 18 months, he declared that his first reason for converting back to Sunnism was that the message of the Qur'an and the message of Shiaism did not go together. The other aspects of Shiaism that troubled him did indeed feature in his decision to leave the Shia faith, yet the Qur'an's inconsistency with the tenets of Shiaism was the first reason leading to his decision.

It is unfortunate that sometimes people do not understand the central relevance of the Qur'an in Islam. They see the Holy Book as a revelation shrouded fully in mystery. This is obviously not the case. The Qur'an can be used as the primary basis for Muslims to decide the truthfulness of the claims by whichever group that claims absolute truth.

I wish that through this work, it has been established for the well intentioned and sincere researcher that the doctrine of Imamah as understood by the Shia faith stands on a very weak footing as far as the Qur'an is concerned. The objective analysis of the instances where the word "Imam" is found in the Qur'an does not, in any way, advance the Shia belief in this concept. In some instances, a close analysis of the Verse shows that many or all of the Shia scholars themselves did not hold these Verses to refer to the Imamah doctrine. In other cases, the narrations presented did not agree with the established principles of Shia belief, and opened up a number of inconsistencies between the presented narrations and the standard Shia belief in Imamah.

This is marked contrast with the very strong and explicit mention, through literally hundreds of clear Qur'anic Ayahs about the Islamic belief in Prophets and Messengers, including the explicit mention of many Prophets/Messengers by name, and the statements that these holy personalities were indeed Prophets and Messengers of Allah. Additionally, the explicit statements about various characteristics of Prophets and Messengers in the Qur'an shows the wide discrepancy between the manners in which the Qur'an uses the term Imam, and the way the words Rasool and Nabi are used.

The objective-minded reader will have been able to note these differences between the way Imamah is presented in Shia beliefs and the way it is shown in the Qur'an, as well as the harmony between the presentation of the concepts of Nubuwwah and Risalah as one of the pillars of Islamic belief and the Qur'an's agreement in this respect.

Allah says:

إِنَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ يَهْدِي لِلَّتِي هِيَ أَقْوَمُ

Lo! this Qur'an guideth unto that which is straightest (Qur'an 17:9)

I end this work by quoting this Verse from the Holy Qur'an. I pray for the success of the honest seeker in his/her quest towards finding the truth. May Allah help those who wish to sincerely find the true faith. Ameen.

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[1] These are the names of the Imams according to the largest branch of Shiaism, the Imamiyah/ Ithna Ashariyah. Other smaller sects of Shiaism emerged in the past that broke from this chain at different eras of Islamic history, and whose list of "Imams" is different from the one presented above. However, in this work, I will concentrate on the beliefs of the majority of Shias. After all, the bulk of Shias are Imamis in belief, and the liveliest Shia propaganda stems from the Imami Shia religious institutions. In addition, some of the general aspects of Imamah are shared by all the denominations who term themselves as "Shia".

[2] "Allamah" is a generic term signifying a scholar, be he a Sunni or Shia. For the purposes of this work, it will be used to refer to Shia scholars. Other titles such as Hujjatul Islam and Ayatullah will also be used to refer to these scholars, depending on the titles they are associated with.

[3] "The Origin of Shiite Islam and its Principles, Part II: Fundamentals of the Religion", Part II: The Fundamentals of the Religion, Section The Fundamental Beliefs. In the Arabic edition of the book, the first sentence occurs on page 218 of the work "Asl-ul-Shia wa Usuluha". Then Allamah Al Ghita goes on to speak about the five principles without first listing them. In both cases, it is clear that the Shia fundamentals of religion are these five tenets.

[4] Aqaed Al Imamiyah, p.65

[5] Asl-ul-Shia wa Usuluha, p.221

[6] Imamate and Leadership, Chapter "The Place of Leadership in Islam"

[7] Imamate and Leadership, Chapter "The Method of Choosing the Imam or Leader "

[8] Asl-ul-Shia wa Usuluha, pp. 211-212

[9] Shia, p. 185-186

[10] Aqaed Al Imamiyah, p.66

[11] Some classical Shia scholars of high status such as Mufid and Sadooq are called "Shaykh" by the latter-day Shias, and I will follow that convention in these instances. In such cases it is hoped that there is no confusion with the Sunni usage of the title "Shaykh" for Sunni scholars.

[12] Awail Muqalat p.41-42 (as mentioned in Bihar Al Anwar, Volume 26, p. 298)

[13] A view being a matter of "Ijtihad" means that the individual scholar may have a specific position with respect to the issue at hand. However, he acknowledges that this position is not the only valid one and that the textual evidences for contrary views exist and cannot be easily discarded.

[14] <http://lankarani.net/eng/faq/ideology.html>

[15] Islamic Government:Hukumat-i-Islami, p.22

[16] Islamic Government:Hukumat-i-Islami, p.52 (footnote 63)

[17] Bihar Al Anwar, Volume 26, p.297

[18] Some of the Shia readers may take objection to my use of sources such as "Shia Encyclopedia" and "Peshawar Nights" as references. I am aware that they are not of the same calibre as the writings of classical Shia scholars. However, they are used by the Shia masses in order to preach the Shia faith to the Sunnis. Also, I am not aware of any Shia Marja (religious authority) condemning the writings or asking his followers to abstain from reading them. Instead, the official sites of some Marjas (such as Ayatullah Muhammad Sadeq Shirazi on his website www.shirazi.org.uk) exhort the Shias to present such books and sites as preaching material to the Sunnis.

[19] "Imamat vs. Prophethood (Part I)", Shia Encyclopedia

[20] <http://www.al-islam.org/peshawar/7.1.html>

[21] S.V. Mir Ali/ Ayatullah Mahdi Puya Commentary of Verse 2:124

[22] Shiism:Imamate and Wilayah, p.96

[23] A Shiite Creed, p. 94-95

[24] Awail Maqalaat, p.44

[25] Tafseer Al Mizan, Volume 1, p.274-275

[26] The "us" in this and the following narration are the Imams of the Shia faith.

[27] Al-Istibsar: Volume 1, p.190.

[28] Al-Istibsar: Volume 3, p.158.

[29] Nahjul Balagha, Volume 2, p. 111, Sermon 183

[30] Nahjul Balagha, Volume 2, pp. 177-178, Sermon 198

[31] Saheeh Bukhari, Volume 6, Book 61 (Virtues of the Qur'an), Number 545

[32] Saheeh Muslim, Book 4, Chapter 132 (The Book of Prayers), Number 1756

[33] Saheeh Muslim, Book 4 (The Book of Prayers), Chapter 138, Number 1777

[34] Saheeh Bukhari, Volume 6, Book 61(Virtues of the Qur'an), Number 504

[35] All English translations of the Holy Qur'an are taken from Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthal's translation, unless otherwise specified.

[36] The Mahdi Puya/Ali commentary is not counted among the classical Shia commentaries. However, since it is the one of the main contemporary Shia interpretations in the English language, it can serve for us to understand how present-day Shias interpret many of the Qur'anic Verses.

[37] Tafseer al-Qurtubi, Volume 10, p. 45

[38] Tafseer Ibn Kathir, Volume 4, p.543

[39] Tafseer at-Tabari, Volume 17, p.118

[40] Tafseer al-Safi, Volume 3, p.119

[41] Tafseer Majma-ul-Bayan, Volume 6, p. 127

[42] Tafseer al-Mizan, Volume 12, p. 185

[43] i.e. the Bani Israil

[44] Tafseer Ibn Kathir, Volume 4, p.311

[45] Tafseer al-Qurtubi, Volume 9, p. 17, Tafseer at-Tabari, Volume 15, p. 260

[46] Tafseer at-Tabari, Volume 22, p. 97

[47] Tafseer al-Qurtubi, Volume 16, p. 191

[48] Tafseer Majma-ul-Bayan, Volume 5, p.255

[49] Tafseer Majma-ul-Bayan, Volume 9, p.143; Tafseer at-Tibbyan, Volume 9, p. 274

[50] Tafseer Ibn Kathir, Volume 4, p.115; Tafseer al-Qurtubi, Volume 8, p. 84-85; Tafseer at-Tabari, Volume 14, p. 141

[51] Tafseer al- Qummi, Volume 1, p. 283; Tafseer al-Safi, Volume 2, p. 324-325; Tafseer Majma-ul-Bayan, Volume 5, p. 21-22

[52] Tafseer al-Qurtubi, Volume 13, p. 289; Tafseer Ibn Kathir, Volume 6, p. 238; Tafseer at-Tabari, Volume 19, p. 580

[53] Tafseer al-Mizan, Volume 16, p.40

[54] Tafseer al-Tabari, Volume 20, p.486; Tafseer al-Qurtubi, Volume 15, p.13

[55] Tafseer at-Tibbyan, Volume 8, p.447-448; Tafseer al-Mizan, Volume 17, p.66-68; Nasser Makarem Shirazi Commentary, Volume 5, p.271-272

[56] Ali/Mahdi Puya Commentary of Verse 36:12

[57] Tafseer at-Tabari, Volume19, p. 507; Tafseer al-Qurtubi Volume 13, p. 249

[58] Tafseer at-Tabari, Volume 20, p. 189; Tafseer al-Qurtubi Volume 14, p. 109

[59] Tafseer Majma-ul-Bayan, Volume 7, p.414

[60] Tafseer al-Qummi, Volume 2, p. 133-135; Tafseer at-Tibbyan, Volume 8, p. 129; Tafseer al-Safi, Volume 4, p. 80-81

[61] Children of Israel

[62] Musa (Alayhi Salam)

[63] Tafseer al-Mizan, Volume 16, p. 266

[64] Imamate and Leadership, Chapter "The Method of Choosing the Imam or Leader "

[65] Shia, p. 185

[66] Nasser Makarem Shirazi Commentary, Volume 5, p.111

[67] Tafseer at-Tibbyan, Volume 8, p. 307

[68] Imamate: The Vicegerency of the Prophet, p.42.

[69] Tafseer Ibn Kathir, Volume 6, p. 125; Tafseer at-Tabari, Volume 19, p. 303

[70] Ali/Mahdi Puya Commentary of Verse 25:72

[71] Tafseer al-Safi, Volume 4, p. 26-27

[72] The Imamiyah Shias are very particular about showing that the Prophet (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) had foretold the 12 Imams and that their names were known not only to the particular Imams, but also to their followers and disciples. This view is very precarious if we consider the historical evidence in its totality. However, this is outside the scope of the discussion in this book.

[73] Tafseer al-Qurtubi, Volume 10, p. 296-298. al-Qurtubi does mention two narrations about the "Imam" referring to the "Imam of the times". What is noteworthy in one of these reports is that even in this case the "Imam" is tied to a Prophet such as Ibrahim (Alayhi Salam), Musa (Alayhi Salam), Isa (Alayhi Salam), and Muhammad (Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam) in the case of the good leaders and to an evil leader in the case of the followers of falsehood. Again, this does not support the Shia stance. In any case, this issue will be explored later in the work.

[74] Tafseer Ibn Kathir, Volume 5, p. 96; Tafseer at-Tabari, Volume 17, p. 498

[75] Tafseer at-Tibbyan, Volume 6, p. 504

[76] Tafseer Majma-ul-Bayan, Volume 6, p. 275

[77] Tafseer al-Mizan, Volume 13, p. 165-171

[78] Tafseer Ibn Kathir, Volume 5, p.355

[79] Tafseer al-Qurtubi, Volume 11, p. 305

[80] Tafseer al-Safi, Volume 3, p. 347

[81] Tafseer Majma-ul-Bayan, Volume 7, p. 101

[82] Tafseer at-Tibbyan, Volume 7, p. 265

[83] Tafseer al-Mizan, Volume 13, p. 304-305

[84] i.e. he does not mention which duties they performed solely in their capacity as Imams, but not in their roles as Prophets.

[85] Ali/ Mahdi Puya Commentary of Verse 12:100

[86] This situation comes into play due to the Shia belief that every time should have only one Imam.

[87] Tafseer at-Tabari, Volume 2, p. 563

[88] Tafseer ibn Kathir, Volume 1, p. 403; Tafseer al-Qurtubi, Volume 2, p. 97-107

[89] Tafseer Ibn Kathir, Volume 1, p. 403

[90] Tafseer al-Qurtubi, Volume 1, p. 108

[91] Asl-ul-Shia wa Usuluha, p.212

[92] Tafseer al-Mizan, Volume 1, p. 278

[93] Ali/ Mahdi Puya Commentary of Verse 2:124

[94] Tafseer al-Mizan, Volume 1, p. 274

[95] Some Shias may argue that being unjust at any point of one's life would give ammunition to the opponents of Allah, who would use these past actions as evidence against such people. One instance of this reasoning comes from Allamah Musavi Lari in "Imamate and Leadership" where he says that Firaun took Musa's (Alayhi Salam) actions before he was granted Prophethood as a proof against him. Musa (Alayhi Salam) was one of the top Prophets of Allah, and according to Shias, he was also an Imam, so it is inappropriate to use this case as an example of how a person's past deeds can be used against him if he is not "Ghayr Thaalim".

[96] <http://www.sistani.org/local.php?modules=nav&nid=5&cid=1143>

[97] For this section, the translations of the Qur'an are taken from the Hilali and Khan translation, as they have left the word "unjust" as "Zalim" in all instances of their translation.

[98] Tafseer al-Mizan, Volume 1, p. 275

[99] Tafseer al-Mizan, Volume 1, p.276

[100] Ali/ Puya Commentary of Verse 2:124

[101] Nasser Makarem Shirazi Commentary, Volume 1, p.140

[102] <http://www.al-islam.org/peshawar/4.2.html>

[103] <http://www.al-islam.org/peshawar/4.3.html>

[104] Any person with an objective mind would realize that the Hadeeth is saying the exact opposite of what Shirazi was trying to concoct in this case. However, it is important for the readers to know the different ways in which Shias attempt to present their case.

[105] Bihar Al Anwar, Volume 26, p.82

[106] The word Prophet will be used to refer to Nabi and Messenger will be used to refer to Rasool. While the differences between Nabis and Rasools will not be discussed here in detail, the terms will be separated in their English form to avoid confusion.

[107] There is a difference of opinion among Muslim scholars regarding the exact level of responsibility a people have before the true message comes to them. However, it is clear to all scholars that a people to whom the message has not arrived for many centuries cannot be expected to follow the true religion in the same way a people whom in their midst is a Prophet.

[108] Tafseer Ibn Kathir, Volume 1, p. 665

[109] Ali/ Mahdi Puya Commentary of Verse 2:246

[110] Nasser Makarem Shirazi Commentary, Volume 5, p.111

[111] Tafseer al-Qummi, Volume 1, p. 81

[112] Kamal ad-Din wa Tamaam-e-Nihmah, p.160-161

[113] It should be noted that Allamah Muhammad Rizivi and Allamah Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizivi are two different Shia scholars.

[114] http://www.dartabligh.org/q_a/i.html#12

[115] Ali/ Mahdi Puya Commentary of Verse 14:4

[116] Tafseer al-Safi, Volume 3, p. 79

[117] http://www.dartabligh.org/q_a/i.html#12

[118] Tafseer Ibn Kathir, Volume 5, p.175

[119] Ali/ Mahdi Puya Commentary of Verse 18:

[120] Ali/ Ayatullah Mahdi Puya Commentary of Verse 21:73

[121] Nasser Makarem Shirazi Commentary, Volume 4, p. 193

[122] Tafseer ibn Kathir, Volume 5, p.355

[123] Some Shia commentaries naturally paint the picture that the "Holy Imams" are the ones who are the witnesses being referred to in this and other Verses. Nevertheless, the Verse talks in general to all the believers and mentions that Ibrahim (Alayhi Salam) named this group as "Muslims". It is beyond doubt that no Shia considers the "12 Imams" to have been the only group of "Muslims".